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# WORLD WAR II *The* **ATLAS**

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A WORLD SCARRED BY WAR

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# W O R L D W A R I I

# *The* ATLAS

**T**he Second World War is the most devastating conflict our planet has seen, an all-consuming fight for survival with every human life hanging in the balance. Inside this bookazine from the makers of *History of War*, we will explore the bloody clash that took over the globe. We will spotlight the battlegrounds where the fighting was the fiercest, highlight the nations that mustered domestic expertise to fight back against their enemies, discover how pivotal leaders led armies into fierce battles and much more. Over these pages, you'll encounter maps that outline key moments of defining skirmishes provided by cartographers and The Map Archive; if you wish to discover more, we recommend visiting [themaparchive.com](http://themaparchive.com).

Get ready to rewind the clock and journey across a world scarred by war.



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# The WORLD WAR II ATLAS

Future PLC Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA

## World War II The Atlas Editorial

Editor **Drew Sleep**

Designer **William Shum**

Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**

Head of Art & Design **Greg Whitaker**

Editorial Director **Jon White**

## History Of War Editorial

Editor-in-Chief **Tim Williamson**

Senior Designer **Curtis Fermor-Dunman**

Content Director **Gemma Lavender**

Senior Art Editor **Duncan Crook**

## Contributors

Hareth Al Bustani, Charles Ginger, The Map Archive

## Cover images

Alamy

## Photography

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## Advertising

Media packs are available on request

Commercial Director **Clare Dove**

## International

Head of Print Licensing **Rachel Shaw**

licensing@futurenet.com

www.futurecontenthub.com

## Circulation

Head of Newtrade **Tim Matthers**

## Production

Head of Production **Mark Constance**

Production Project Manager **Matthew Eglinton**

Advertising Production Manager **Joanne Crosby**

Digital Editions Controller **Jason Hudson**

Production Managers **Keely Miller, Nola Cokely**

**Vivienne Calvert, Fran Twentyman**

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Chief executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**  
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**  
Chief financial officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)125 442 244

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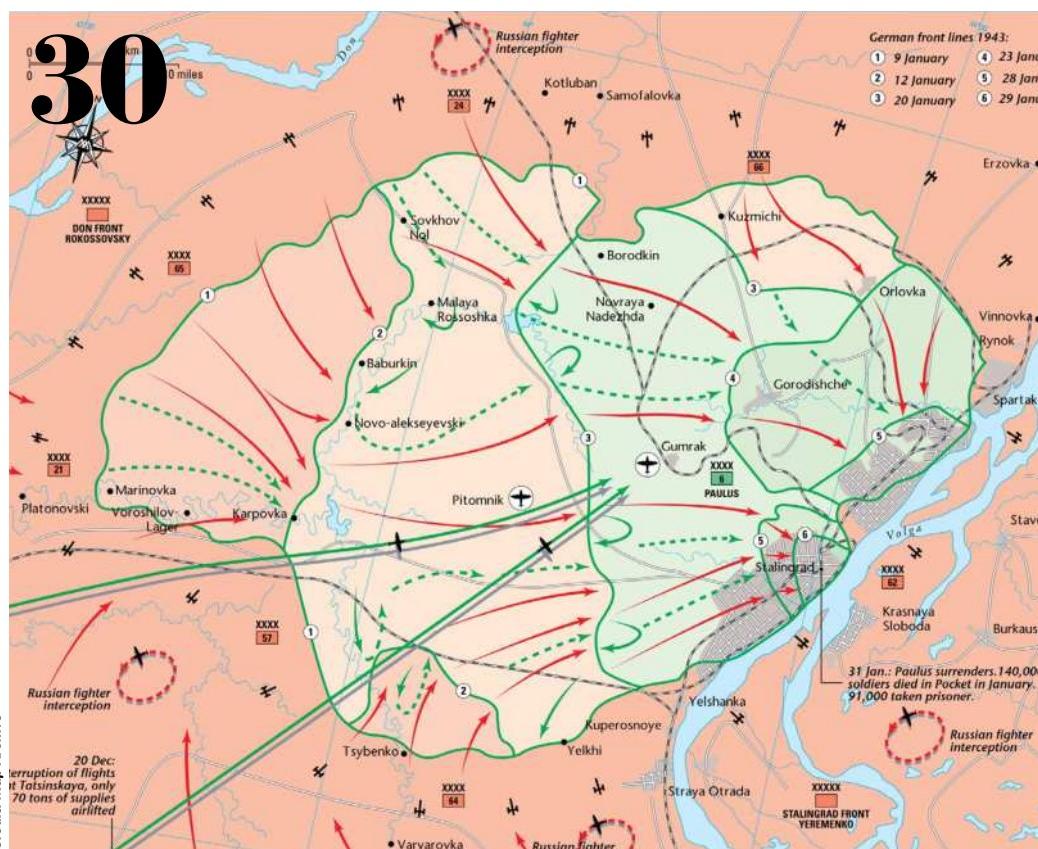
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Credit: Getty

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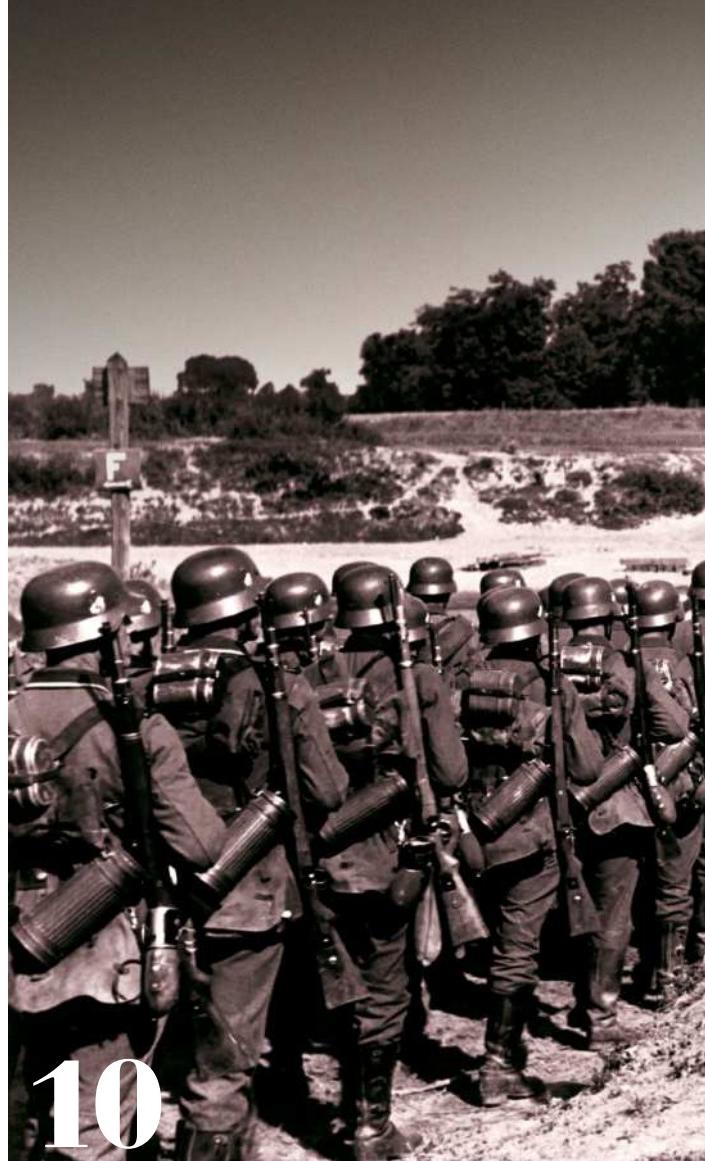
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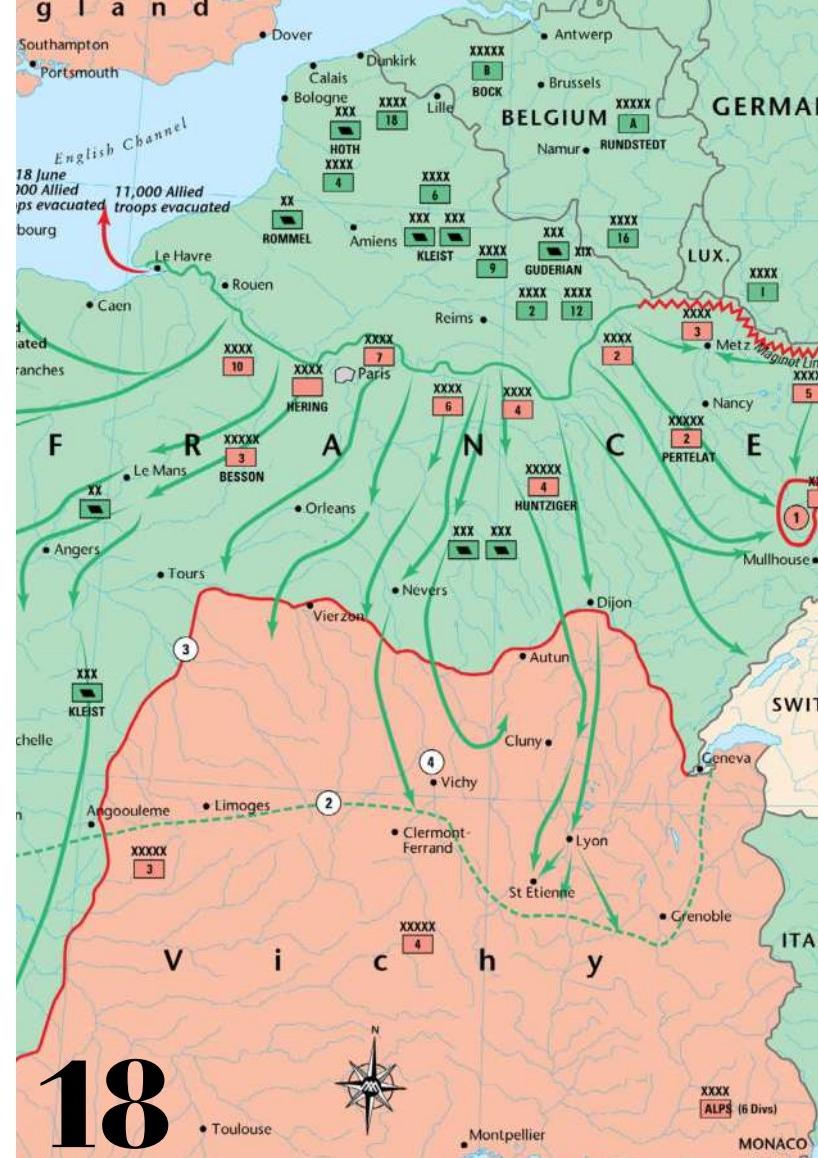
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POLAND, SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 1939

# DEFENDING AGAINST THE BLITZKRIEG

In 1939, Hitler continued to expand the Third Reich's borders by invading neighbouring Poland. The nation's armed forces fought back, becoming the first defenders to resist the hitherto uncontested Nazi conquests of Europe. However, has the myth of the unstoppable German 'lightning war' clouded the real causes of Poland's collapse?

WORDS ROGER MOORHOUSE

**S**urely they don't want to attack us," the tank driver thought, observing the Polish cavalry from the safety of his Panzer III, "that would be madness." But then, with the thunder of hooves, attack they did – according to one of many German propaganda 'memoirs' of the time – only to be cut down in a bloody chaos by German heavy machine guns.

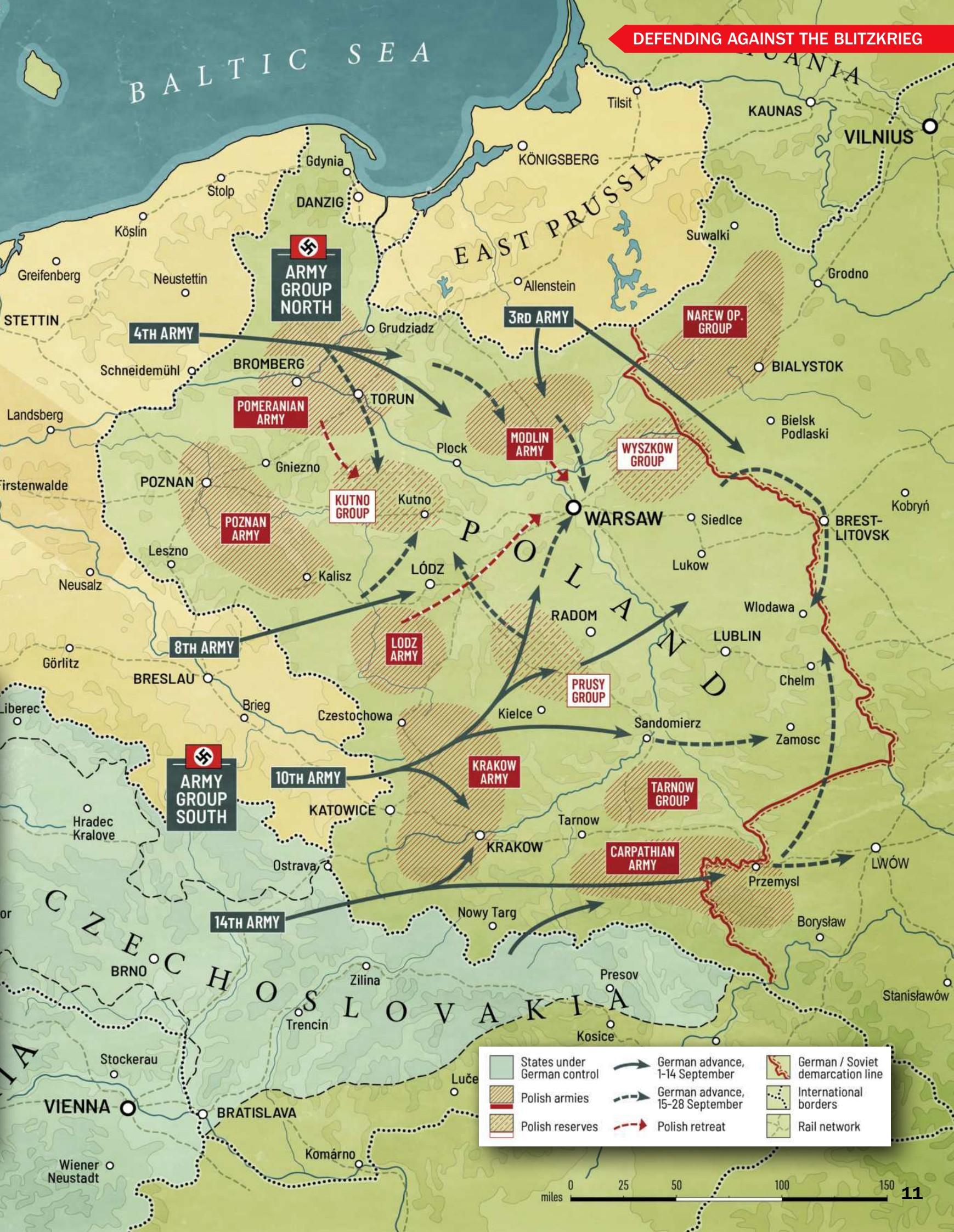
When most of us think about the Polish Campaign of 1939, this is the image that comes to mind – that of the Poles supposedly sending their cavalrymen charging against the hardened steel of the Wehrmacht's panzers. Like all the best stories, it's a myth, of course, a fable woven by the German Propaganda Ministry from half-truths and prejudice, designed to show the Poles as feckless, foolish and unworthy of sympathy.

In truth, the Polish army in 1939 was nowhere near as primitive as its enemies would have had the world believe. The fifth largest standing army in the world, it was well-trained, well-motivated and comparatively well-equipped. Even Hitler, in a moment of magnanimity, conceded that the ordinary Polish soldier "fought courageously".

So, what did the September Campaign look like from the Polish perspective? What did the Poles think they were doing in September 1939? How did they plan to hold and defeat the Nazi juggernaut? And what went wrong?

Adolf Hitler salutes troops marching across the River San, Poland, 10 September 1939





Poland had re-emerged in 1918 following the collapse of the Russian Empire and the Central Powers – Germany and Austria-Hungary – the three states that had partitioned and occupied the country since the late 18th century. Though the 1920s and 30s were difficult, much progress was made and by 1939, Poland's armed forces were full of confidence and vigour, boasting submarines, destroyers, tanks and aircraft of a comparable standard to many contemporaries.

On the ground the army was scarcely the backward-looking, cavalry-centred anachronism that German propaganda would portray. With one million men under arms, across some 30 divisions of infantry and 11 cavalry brigades, it was not inconsiderable.

Neither was it shy of innovation. Polish armourers had developed the highly effective wz.35 anti-tank rifle, as well as the excellent wz.1928 machine-gun, and the Vis pistol – a variant of the iconic Browning M1911 Colt – which appeared in 1936, and is often described as one of the best handguns of the era.

Neither were the Polish cavalry units a military throwback. Fighting dismounted and using their horses for speed and mobility, they were equipped with the formidable Bofors 75mm field gun and represented the crème de la crème of military service. Away from the propaganda they would repeatedly prove their worth in the conflict to come.

Nonetheless, economic and political weakness in the years that followed independence had starved the Polish military of investment. Most grievously, Poland could ill afford the huge costs demanded by mechanisation. Polish military spending in the five years to 1939, for example, was less than three per cent of that of Hitler's Germany over the same period. What Germany spent to equip a single armoured division in those years exceeded the entire annual budget for

the Polish army. Financially it was David going up against Goliath.

So, though the Polish army had around 700 tanks by 1939, only a minority of them – such as the 98 examples of the ten-ton 7TP model – might be expected to stand in comparison with the German Panzer II, then the mainstay of Wehrmacht armour. More seriously, Polish forces were grievously outnumbered, with only two motorised brigades, facing the Germans with seven armoured divisions and a numerical superiority in armoured vehicles of more than 5:1.

The situation in the air was no more comforting for the Poles. Outnumbered, of course, with 400 or so serviceable combat aircraft facing around 2,500 machines of the Luftwaffe, they were also outgunned. Though they possessed some decent aircraft – such as the PZL P.7, an all-metal, high-wing monoplane fighter, and the PZL.37 Łos, a capable twin-engine light bomber – the rapid advances in aeronautical technology in the late 1930s meant that they would go to war in 1939 with obsolete hardware.

Poland, then, faced an almost impossible situation in 1939. As its totalitarian neighbours grew more aggressive and, crucially, found common cause following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, Poland was internationally isolated and exposed. Acutely aware of their predicament, the country's military and political leaders knew that any coming war had to be a collective effort. Poland could not afford to fight her enemies alone and so urgently needed to secure reliable allies. This, they believed, was achieved with the signing of the Franco-Polish Alliance and the Anglo-Polish Mutual Assistance Agreement.

Yet the German threat still had to be faced down, and in doing so Polish military planners envisaged a rather complex balancing act. Their 'Plan Zachód' or 'West' correctly anticipated a German attack from three general directions:

eastward from Pomerania into the so-called 'Polish Corridor', north-eastward from Silesia in the direction of Warsaw, and southward from East Prussia, also directed at the Polish capital.

Given the German preponderance in men and materiel, simply flooding those largely indefensible border regions with Polish troops made little strategic sense. Yet the Poles did not want to be accused of a lack of will that might have compromised any Anglo-French commitment to their defence, so Polish armies were ordered to engage any invasion, thereby giving time for deeper-lying defence lines to be developed and reserves to be mobilised. Poland's main forces, then, were deployed along the country's western frontiers, with the heaviest concentrations in those areas where the German advance was expected.

That vigorous defence of the frontiers, though strategically questionable, was deemed politically necessary, to contradict any suggestion on the part of its would-be allies that Poland was unwilling to defend itself. Once those international alliances had been triggered, the logic ran, Polish forces were to avoid being encircled and destroyed, and, while inflicting maximum losses on the enemy, to conduct a fighting withdrawal to more defensible lines, such as the area east of the River Vistula, which bisected the country north to south. In the third phase there would be a counter-offensive to coincide with the expected entry into the war of Poland's western allies.

So Poland's strategic plan was predicated on two principles: firstly that their forward forces would be able to withdraw swiftly enough to avoid encirclement, and secondly that they would receive assistance from the British and the French. Sadly, both assumptions would prove to be erroneous.

Hitler's attack was preceded by an effort to detach Poland from its international alliances by casting the victim as the villain.



*The German army entering Poland after attacking the country on 1 September, using seven armoured divisions and more than one million German soldiers*

"HITLER HAD MISCALCULATED, HE HAD EXPECTED THE WESTERN POWERS - WEAK AND CORRUPT AS THEY WERE, TO HIS MIND - TO BACK DOWN. TO THEIR CREDIT, THEY DID NOT"

Shortly before final  
capitulation, Polish  
soldiers surrender



Above: Wehrmacht soldiers pull open a barrier at the German-Polish border on 1 September



Above: Posters announcing the mobilisation and conscription of soldiers into the Polish Army



Above: View from the cockpit of a Heinkel bomber, flying over a Polish town



Above: Polish civilians moments before death by firing squad



Above: Hitler's forces were strongly supported by armoured and motorised divisions



A Luftwaffe Bf-110 flies over Polish airspace during the invasion

At 8.00pm, on 31 August 1939, SS men under the leadership of Major Alfred Naujocks, attacked a radio station in the German border town of Gleiwitz, posing as Polish irregulars. After locking the staff in the basement, they attempted to broadcast an incendiary message, in Polish, over the airwaves to announce that Germany had been attacked by the Poles. The clinching detail was the bloodied corpse of Franciszek Honiok, a well-known advocate for the Polish cause in Upper Silesia, which was left at the site. By morning, as his forces rolled into Poland, Hitler would tell the world that Germany was the victim and was now "returning fire".

Yet if Hitler had hoped that this apparent perfidy would serve to sway the British and French away from their alliance with Poland, he was to be mistaken. In the days that followed he was presented with two ultimatums – from London and Paris – demanding that he withdraw his forces or face war. When he refused war was duly declared on 3 September 1939. Hitler had miscalculated, he had expected the western powers – weak and corrupt as they were, to his mind – to back down. To their credit, they did not.

But, though 'national honour' would not allow the British and French to abandon Poland to its fate entirely, it was not enough to bring

about any meaningful intervention. Though the British and French waxed lyrical about Polish heroism in nobly resisting fascism, they did little to assist their ally. The RAF undertook some desultory bombing of German naval installations, but otherwise resorted to leafleting raids, which pointlessly implored the German people to cease and desist.

The French were no more determined. Though they had made concrete commitments to Poland in high-level talks earlier in 1939, promising to attack Germany within three weeks of the opening of an offensive against the Poles, they restricted themselves to a few tentative probing advances in the area of the Saar, before withdrawing. For all the kind words from its allies, Poland would be left to its fate.

Poland, then, fought on alone, but was never informed that it had been abandoned. So, while Polish forces desperately battled the Germans in the Polish Corridor, or at Mława on the northern approaches to Warsaw, or in the engagements at Mokra, or around Łódź and Piotrków to the southwest, they did so in the earnest expectation that their sacrifice was significant. That it was part of a wider Allied effort and that help was on its way.

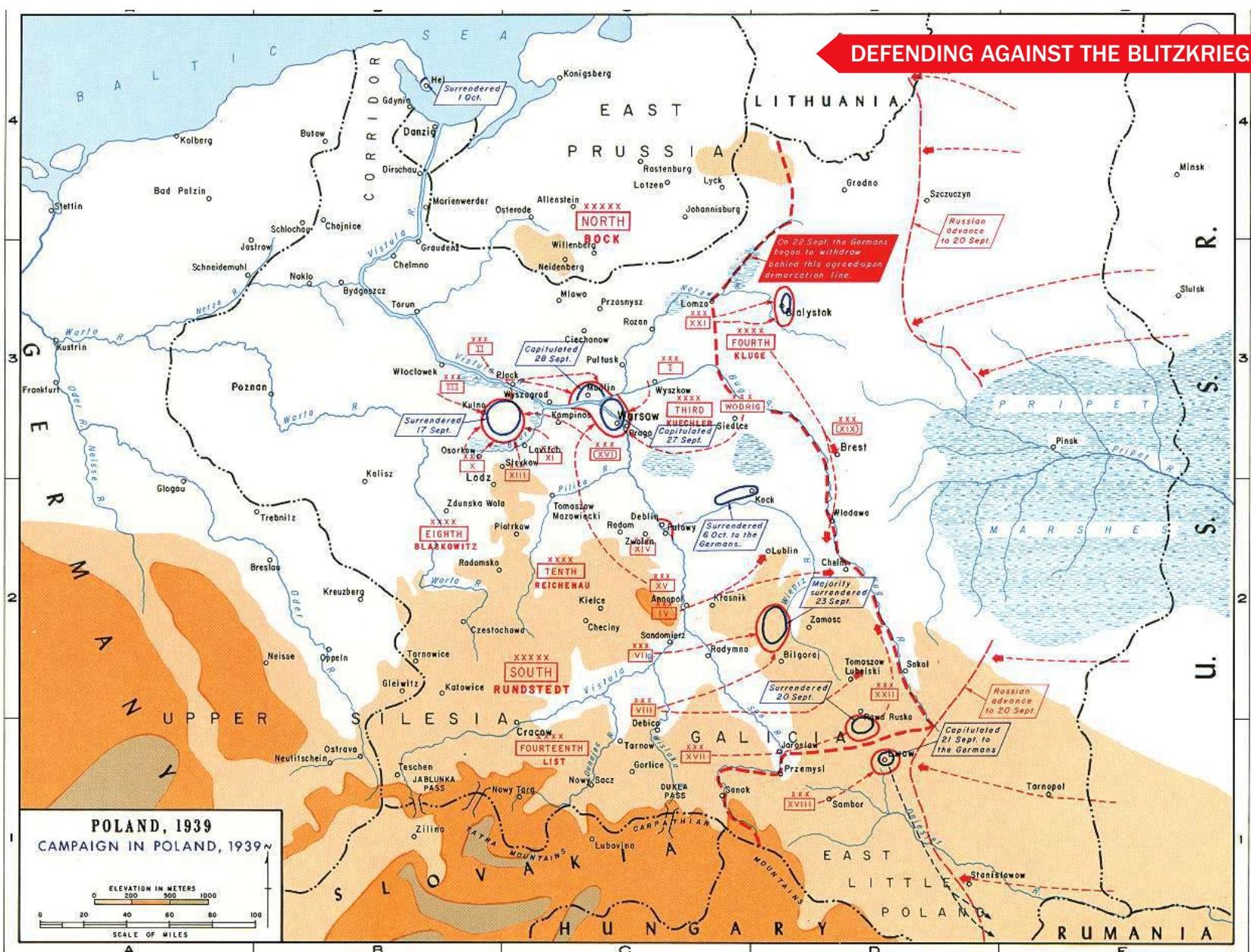
So, they fought on, even after Kraków, the former capital, fell on 6 September, and after German spearheads reached Warsaw on the

evening of the 8 September. They fought on even after their air force was swept from the skies by the sleek, more powerful machines of the Luftwaffe.

They even fought back. On the afternoon of 9 September Polish forces struck southward across the Bzura river, west of Warsaw, smashing into the flank of the German armies heading for the capital. Exploiting the benefit of surprise they made considerable headway, liberating a number of towns and villages before the line was stabilised. Over the ten days that followed German units withdrawn from the Warsaw suburbs drove Polish forces back to their starting positions.

But the sacrifice was in vain. Unknown to Poland's soldiers, their cause was effectively abandoned, even as the fighting raged on the Bzura. On 12 September, the British and French met in a grandly-titled Supreme War Council summit, at Abbeville in northern France. Despite publicly stressing their 'unity of will' in resisting German aggression and, yet again, praising Polish steadfastness, the Allies privately conceded that there was nothing they could do to prevent Poland's defeat. In truth, they hadn't even tried.

To add insult to injury the German invasion of Poland was carried out with extreme prejudice. German soldiers, indoctrinated to feel racially



superior to their eastern neighbours, were encouraged to act mercilessly. Luftwaffe bombing raids routinely targeted undefended Polish towns – such as Wielun, Sulejów or Frampol, the last of which was hit in a cynical exercise to check on bombing accuracy.

German aircraft regularly strafed railway trains, or columns of terrified refugees.

Villagers caught behind German lines could expect little more than arbitrary violence. In some cases, anti-Semitism was evidently the main driver. For many German soldiers, Poland represented their first exposure to Jewish populations that appeared to approximate to the de-humanised stereotype presented by Nazi propaganda. Their response was predictably brutal. At Konskie, German troops fired blindly into a crowd of Jews who had been rounded up to dig graves, killing 22. At Błonie, west of Warsaw, 50 Jews were massacred, at Pułtusk a further 80, at Krasnosielsk another 50. There are countless other examples.

But all Poles – whether Jewish or not – were under threat in 1939. Executions of POWs were not uncommon. At Ciepielów some 300 Polish prisoners were machine-gunned after a brief engagement halted the progress of the German 15th Motorised Infantry Regiment. One of the worst examples occurred at Sladów, where 358 Poles – soldiers and civilians – were

## "THE ALLIES PRIVATELY CONCEDED THAT THERE WAS NOTHING THEY COULD DO TO PREVENT POLAND'S DEFEAT. IN TRUTH, THEY HADN'T EVEN TRIED"

massacred on the banks of the River Vistula, following the failure of the Polish counter-attack on the Bzura.

Actions such as these were often euphemistically labelled as 'reprisals' or 'pacifications' by the Germans, but any excuse sufficed. At Simonsdorf, in the Danzig Free State, 40 Poles – railway and customs employees, along with their families – were executed by German forces after they had frustrated a surprise attack. According to an eye-witness, their bodies were piled up and a sign was erected declaring "Here lies the Polish minority from Simonsdorf". At Sulejówek, 50 civilians were murdered in retaliation for the death of a single German officer. At Kajetanowice, 72 Poles were massacred in response to the death of two Wehrmacht horses in a friendly fire incident. Further examples of brutality are legion: 34 Poles were killed at Torzeniec, 26 at Łaziska Góra, 38 in Zimnowoda, 75 in Parzymiechy.

In part such atrocities were a consequence of the nature of the German advance – what we retrospectively call Blitzkrieg – in which mobile, fast-moving troops disrupted and isolated a more static defence, thereby causing many defenders to be left behind the advance, where continued resistance could easily be interpreted as the work of 'irregulars' or 'partisans'. Others have suggested that the inexperience of German soldiers may have contributed to a trigger-happy atmosphere in which troops fired first and asked questions later.

Yet, valid though they may be, such reasons cannot provide a full explanation for German atrocities. In the 36 days of the September campaign there were over 600 massacres carried out by the Germans alone, an average of over 16 per day. Clues to the motivation behind such actions are abundant in the letters and diaries of German soldiers, many of which described the Poles as "uncivilised", "filthy", "a rabble". In short, as one Wehrmacht soldier confessed, "barely human".

German prejudice towards the Poles was widespread and well-documented, and Nazi ideology added a biological element to it, which saw Poles very simply as a lesser form of human life, one slated only for a lifetime of servitude to their German masters, and for long-term extermination. And, of course, if the enemy was perceived in this manner, it was easy for conventional morals and behaviours to be suspended. As one soldier wrote, "The Poles behave in an unhuman way. Who can blame us for using harsher methods?" It was a neat euphemism for racially motivated murder.

While the Germans brought race war to western Poland, the Soviets imported class war to the east. The Kremlin had sold its invasion of eastern Poland – carried out on 17 September in line with the Nazi-Soviet Pact – as a 'liberation', but it was decidedly belligerent, with approximately 500,000 combat troops and nearly 5,000 tanks confronting the lightly-armed forces of the Polish border protection corps.

For those Poles who fell under Soviet control, there was no doubt about the Red Army's revolutionary intentions. In countless towns and villages, Soviet officers goaded the masses to rise up against their "lords and oppressors", to seize property and "avenge the pain of exploitation with blood". Local communist militias quickly complied, targeting landowners and members of the local administration. Victims were often dragged from their beds and lynched, or beaten to death. One court official was tied by his feet to a horse and cart, which was then driven around the cobbled streets until he was dead.

Prisoners of war, meanwhile, were sorted according to their social class. Officers were routinely separated out from other ranks for interrogation, along with those who appeared to be especially well-dressed or well-equipped. In time, with so many escaping the net by shedding their uniforms or pulling off their insignia of rank, the Soviets began checking their prisoners' hands. Beloruchki – those with white, uncalledous palms – were clearly not from the working class, and so were also detained. For some of them, at least, it was the start of a journey that would end in execution.

In some cases, communist class fury would be assuaged more immediately. Like the Germans, the Red Army was content – in the name of ideology – to ignore the moral norms of warfare. A group of injured Polish prisoners taken near Wytyczno, for example, was locked in the local town hall and denied medical assistance. By the time help arrived, the following day, all of them had bled to death.

Though there are numerous examples of such atrocities, the true scale of Soviet persecution of Polish prisoners and civilians in their zone of occupation in 1939 is unknown. The Kremlin's propaganda and its rigid control of the media and of memory meant that many accounts would have died with the surviving witnesses, in Polish prisons or in the Gulags of Siberia.

Yet, the political intention and the scale of the ambition behind it can be gauged by recalling the Katyn massacres of the following year. The murder of some 22,000 Polish officers taken prisoner during the September Campaign, who were systematically executed by their Soviet

captors, demonstrated that the Soviets aimed at nothing less than a social revolution.

The Katyn victims represented the Polish elite – army officers, doctors, lawyers, intellectuals, indeed all those who were seen as the best able to foster resistance against Soviet rule. Their wholesale elimination was, to the revolutionaries in the Kremlin, an essential precondition for the successful communisation of Polish society. Murder was not carried out in a haphazard manner, or in the heat of battle, it was an ideologically driven necessity.

As Poland collapsed under the combined weight of Nazi and Soviet barbarism, and her armed forces attempted to escape the maelstrom to be able to fight another day, the battle for Poland disintegrated into a number of protracted sieges, at Warsaw, Modlin and on the peninsula at Hel on the Baltic coast.

All three would be subjected to protracted aerial and land assaults in a bid to force their surrender, with artillery strikes and Stuka divebombers wreaking a hideous toll on the men and machinery on the ground. The worst experiences were endured in the Polish capital, Warsaw, where a German attempt to force a surrender resulted in so-called Black Monday, 25 September, when over 500 tons of bombs were dropped on the city's residential districts, killing an estimated 10,000 Varsovians. As one Polish colonel lamented, "The Germans have decided to take the city by terror."

In the circumstances, senior military personnel convened the following day to discuss a possible surrender of the capital, which was negotiated with the Germans

*German troops parade through the capital Warsaw*





*Victims of the Ciepielow massacre, where 300 Polish prisoners of war were executed by the Wehrmacht*

on 28 September. The following day, the fortress at Modlin – to the north of the capital – followed suit, but not before Wehrmacht soldiers avenged themselves on the defenders, massacring some 600 civilians and POWs in the town of Zakroczymsk. The last siege, of the fortified area of the Hel peninsula, lasted a few more days, with the Polish garrison finally submitting on 2 October.

The final engagement of the Polish Campaign took place between 2 and 5 October, when an amalgam of troops under the command of General Franciszek Kleeberg was engaged by the Germans near Kock to the southeast of Warsaw. The Poles again gave a good account of themselves, but given that the rest of the country was now in the hands of their enemies, continued resistance was futile, and Kleeberg's men opted to surrender. The first military campaign of World War II was over.

Why, then, did the Poles lose? The easy answer and the answer that German wartime propaganda would have us believe was – Blitzkrieg. The Poles were overcome by a superior force with superior tactics, superior technology and a superior military doctrine. There is something in that, certainly. It had been a very unequal fight. Not only had Germany enjoyed a numerical advantage over the Poles, but its military hardware and military doctrine sometimes appeared to belong to another age of warfare. Though the Poles fought well, destroying as many as 1,000 German tanks and armoured vehicles, and around 600 aircraft, they were outgunned and outfought in every theatre. And when

Stalin's Red Army entered the fray – itself the largest military force in the world at that time – they were already reeling. Faced with both German and Soviet forces, the Polish had little to no chance.

These facts are incontrovertible, but to attribute the defeat solely to the deployment of Blitzkrieg is to flatter German forces. For all the undeniable superiority that the Wehrmacht enjoyed, and the magnitude of its victory, attributing Poland's defeat to a military idea that was only imperfectly applied in 1939, is a gross simplification. There was clearly more to the story than that.

For one thing, Poland was geographically doomed. Not only was it flanked on three sides by Germany and its ally Slovakia, with the equally hostile Soviet Union to the east, it also consisted predominantly of flat terrain largely lacking in natural obstacles – the great North European Plain – which is perfect for the effective use of tanks and motorised infantry. Even when the Poles were able to defend prepared positions, therefore – such as at Mława or Węgierska Góra – they were forced to withdraw owing to the risk of being outflanked and surrounded.

Additionally, the weather played its capricious part. The summer of 1939 was one of the driest on record in central Europe, and rainfall in Poland that August was barely two-thirds of what it had been in previous years. Consequently, the river systems that might feasibly have been exploited to form an additional line of defence – most notably the Narew in the north and the Warta in the



*Danzig – the city where the Second World War began*



*German troops escorting Polish prisoners of war, near Lviv*

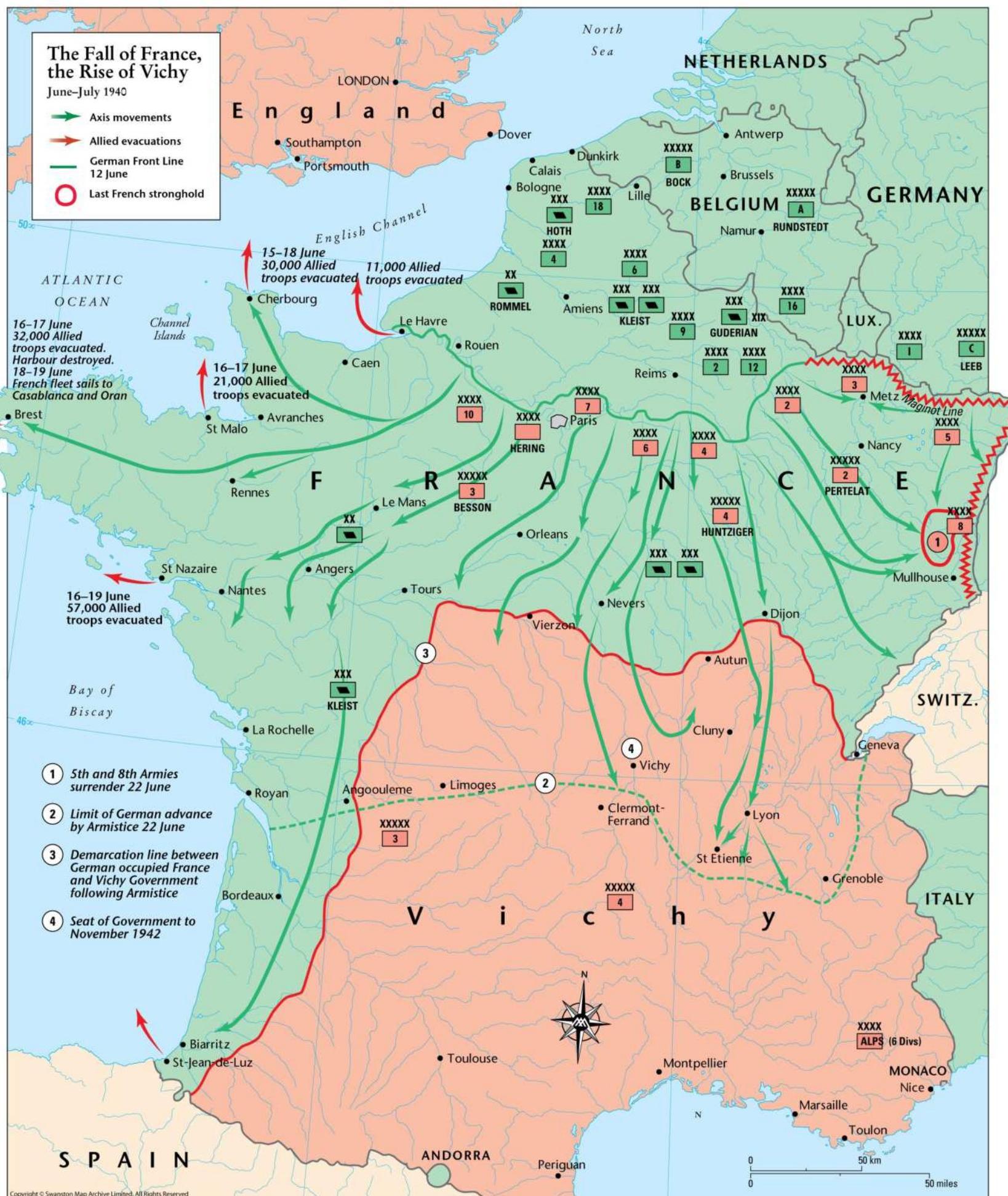
west – lacked the volume of water to make that a viable proposition.

There were also failings of the Poles' own making. For one thing, the Polish High Command's obsession with military secrecy meant that Polish units had no direct contact with troops on their flanks, were not permitted to know the wider strategic plan, and were unable to coordinate their movements effectively. While the Germans were moving faster and hitting harder, the Poles were effectively blind and deaf.

Most seriously, Poland's comparative economic weakness in the inter-war years meant that, for all its size, the Polish army was ill prepared to face the Germans in 1939. The primary problem being the lack of armour. Polish soldiers could muster all the martial dash possible, but they could not adequately stem the Wehrmacht's armoured advance without sufficient armour of their own.

Poland had a feasible strategic plan and its forces generally acquitted themselves well, yet it was ultimately undone by the perfidy of its totalitarian neighbours, and the betrayal of its allies, who did nothing to help, yet neglected to inform Warsaw of their inaction.

Poland's defeat in 1939 was the child of many fathers, therefore, which makes it all the more peculiar that the simplistic mythology of an all-conquering Blitzkrieg has persisted for so long.



FRANCE, MAY - JUNE 1940

# THE FALL OF FRANCE

Poland had fallen quickly, but everyone expected France to put up stiffer resistance – until the Germans attacked

WORDS DAVID SMITH

**T**he style of warfare unleashed by Nazi Germany at the start of World War II was not new. The shocking demolition of Poland's armed forces had been breathtaking and bold, but it followed long-established German strategic principles.

Germany could not afford to engage in protracted wars of attrition. World War I had proved what the outcome of such a conflict was likely to be. The nation did not have the natural resources required for a war effort lasting years, while its limited coastline made blockades easy to enforce. Germany had always needed to seek a quick knock-out blow, and the plans for World War I had conformed to that need, before it had become bogged down in static trench warfare.

Nevertheless, the world saw Germany's tactics as something new, and would christen it blitzkrieg – 'lightning war'.

Following the fall of Poland, Europe braced itself for the next blow. When it came, it would

be on a scale unseen before. What was most remarkable, however, was not the methods employed by the Germans, but the sheer audacity of a small group of commanders. Men like Heinz Guderian simply ignored the misgivings (and sometimes the direct orders) of their superiors.

The German Army as a whole had no faith in or understanding of the tactics championed by Guderian. Repeatedly, the commanders of Germany's massive army groups would caution against advancing too quickly or stretching lines of communication too thinly. Men like Gerd von Rundstedt, commander of Army Group A, were not disciples of blitzkrieg, and were openly hostile to the plans put forward by Guderian. Their misgivings seem misplaced in hindsight, but at the time there were solid reasons for their doubts.

The plan to smash the Allies in the opening phases of the invasion of France was breathtaking in its scale. An entire army group, Army Group B, was to be used as a diversion, attacking through northern Belgium and the Netherlands

and drawing the Allies northwards to meet them. Meanwhile, Army Group A would move through the Ardennes into Belgium and Luxembourg.

There were reasons why the Allies were likely to fall for this ruse. Firstly, an attack through northern Belgium was anticipated. Secondly, the Germans would devote much of their air power to the feint, to both destroy Allied air forces and reinforce the deception. Thirdly, the Ardennes were believed to be impassable to large armoured formations.

The German troops that opened the German campaign, Case Yellow, on 10 May 1940, were not the unstoppable war machine of common perception. Only ten of the 135 divisions allocated to the offensive were mechanised. The vast bulk of the men were plodding infantry, marching on foot or on horse-drawn carts.

Where Guderian's plan excelled was in its concentration of force. The cutting edge of the newly formed armoured divisions were the panzers, but they required infantry support. Rather

## DELIVERANCE AT DUNKIRK

The war had opened in shocking fashion, but Dunkirk allowed the British to fight another day

Dunkirk is hailed as a triumph, but although rescuing nearly a quarter of a million men from death or capture was a major feat, the BEF had suffered an extraordinary defeat at the hands of the Germans.

Relatively small, it was nevertheless an extremely modern army, equipped as well as the Germans. All that changed when the soldiers were evacuated. Left behind were 66,426 men, 25,000 of whom were dead or wounded. Fewer than 5,000 of the nearly 67,000 vehicles taken to the continent with the BEF made the return journey. Artillery was a similarly disastrous story, with 2,472 of the 2,794 guns of the BEF abandoned.

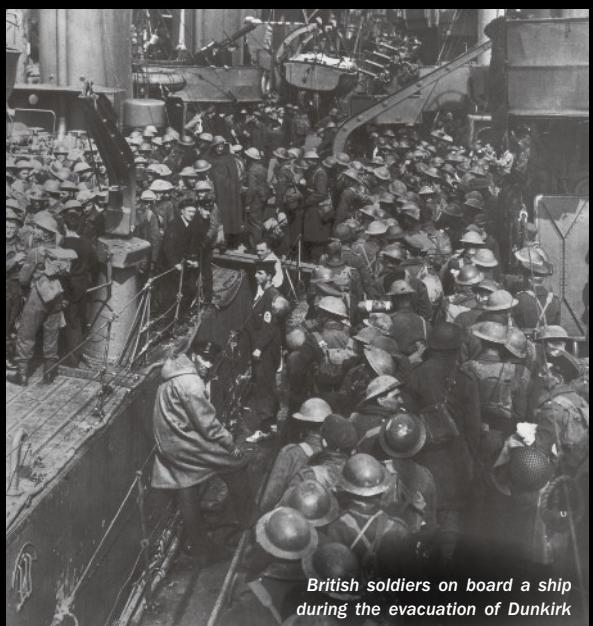
As an invasion of Britain loomed, there were 54 anti-tank guns left in the entire country. The Royal Navy lost six destroyers

during the evacuation, and 19 more were damaged. More than 400 fighters had been downed, among total losses of around 1,000 planes.

Despite this, there was a feeling of huge relief that most of the men had been brought home. The prime minister recognised this relief, but was cautious not to overstate it.

"We must be very careful," Winston Churchill warned, "not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations. But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted."

The RAF had just 524 fighters available in June 1940. These few planes would bear the brunt of the next phase of the war.



British soldiers on board a ship during the evacuation of Dunkirk



*The bulk of Germany's invasion force marched on foot or under horse power*

than allowing the infantry to slow his tanks down, Guderian mounted them in vehicles of their own, so the entire division could move at high speed. There were limited resources, ten armoured divisions would make up the spearhead of Army Group A for the thrust through the Ardennes, with a corps commanded by Guderian himself, comprising three panzer divisions, the tip of the spearhead.

Superb communications would be key (German tanks were equipped with excellent radio systems), as would the initiative allowed junior commanders. Rather than sticking to rigid orders, they would be free to think on their feet and react to developments.

Speed of movement would be the Germans' secret weapon. Army Group A planned to cover the 100 miles from Germany's border to the banks of the Meuse River in just three days. It was scheduled to cross the next day and then keep moving, pushing all the way to the Channel.

Senior army commanders either smirked at the ambition of such a plan, or expressed genuine concern, but Guderian had the utmost faith in his own tactics. Reserve panzer crews were carried on vehicles to make sure the tanks did not need to stop. Refuelling depots were set up along the route of march and supplies were carried by the vehicles themselves. Amphetamines were liberally supplied to the men who would be expected to remain awake and able to fight for three consecutive nights after crossing the Meuse.

The Allies were well equipped, in terms of men and materiel, to counter the German offensive. There were less than 2,500 tanks in the German armies, while the Allies had over 4,000.

## "AIR STRIKES BEGAN ON THE MORNING OF 10 MAY. EQUALLY MATCHED IN THE AIR, THE GERMANS CONCENTRATED ON DESTROYING ALLIED PLANES ON THE GROUND"

Importantly, the Allied tanks were often superior in terms of armour and weaponry.

Air power was fairly equal. The Luftwaffe had 2,500 planes available at the opening of the campaign. The French had 900 and the British added 500, in addition to the air forces of Belgium and the Netherlands.

Where the Germans held the advantage was in choosing their point of attack. With the Allies dispersed to guard against many different scenarios, there was a window of opportunity. If the German advance stalled for any reason, the ponderous Allied armies could converge and stop it in its tracks.

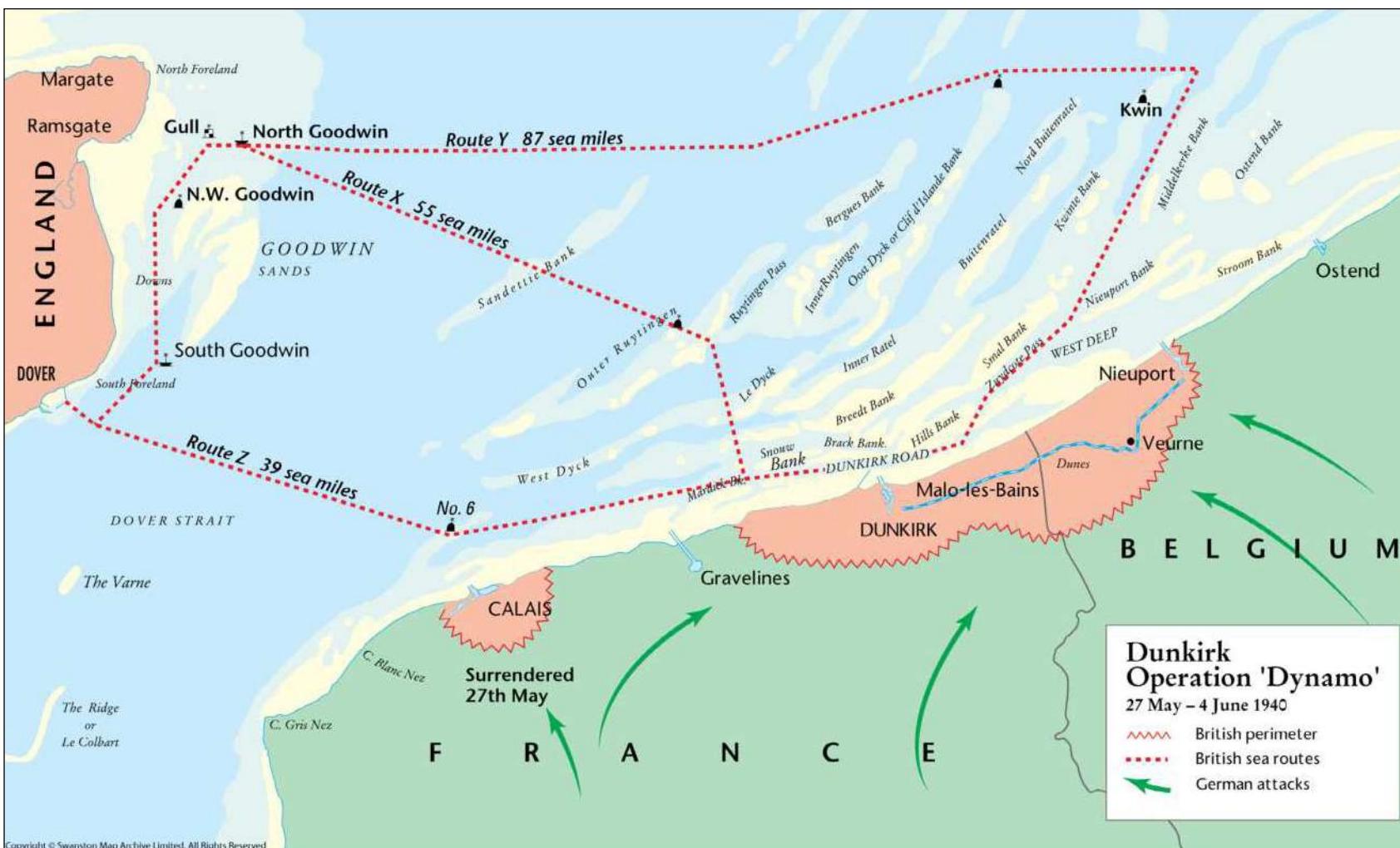
Air strikes began on the morning of 10 May. Equally matched in the air, the Germans concentrated on destroying Allied planes on the ground, wiping out the bulk of the Dutch Air Force in this manner. By 13 May, the Germans had reached the coast of the Netherlands.

To the south, the move through the Ardennes had become a near farcical mess as divisions crossed each other and got caught in a 170-mile traffic jam. Critically, enough of the armoured divisions had got through to reach the Meuse and make a crossing ahead of schedule. Guderian now pushed on, flogging his men and machines in a race to the coast. It was risky in the extreme, as he was moving past the bulk of the French Army

and was highly vulnerable to a flank attack, but the French moved with agonising slowness. Where they did get close enough to engage the Germans, they were badly mauled. The French 1st Armoured Division, with 170 tanks, found itself reduced to just 36 tanks in one day of fighting. Although the French often had superior machines, the Germans integrated their anti-tank guns far more effectively with their panzers, effectively running circles around the French, isolating their tanks and destroying them in huge numbers.

Disaster soon faced the British Expeditionary Force, enclosed in a shrinking pocket around Dunkirk. Tens of thousands of French soldiers were trapped as well, but now the German high command betrayed Guderian and his exhausted men. Hitler's infamous 'Halt Order', delivered on 24 May, forced the panzers to stop. Guderian could ignore the orders of his commanding general, but not the Führer himself. A mistaken belief that the terrain around Dunkirk was unsuitable for tanks, and the boasts of Hermann Göring that he could finish off the Allies at Dunkirk with his Luftwaffe, persuaded Hitler to call off the tanks. The British were able to evacuate the bulk of their men, as well as 122,000 French soldiers, but the Battle of France was far from over.

There were still thousands of British troops in France, as well as a significant air force, and a



new defensive line was established, this time running along the Somme and Aisne rivers. Almost incredibly, Britain sent more troops back over to France just days after plucking men from Dunkirk. Almost all of the rescued French were also repatriated.

But France was a spent force. Germany switched to Case Red, which planned for the complete destruction of France's armed forces, but the job was already mostly done. Having lost more than a million men, dead, wounded or taken prisoner, France was staggering, with just 64 divisions left to face the German invaders. Many of the units were also in a terrible state as far as morale was concerned.

Two days after the Germans occupied Paris, on 14 June, Britain staged a second major evacuation, lifting 124,000 men from France. A desperate plan to merge Britain and France as a single united country to continue the fight came to nothing, and France signed an armistice with Germany on 22 June.

The fall of France had happened more quickly than anyone had dreamed possible. Anyone, that is, except the visionary commanders like Guderian, who had proved that blitzkrieg could bring a major power to its knees in a matter of weeks.



ABOVE The British Expeditionary Force was small at the start of the campaign, but well equipped

# UNITED KINGDOM, JUNE - OCTOBER 1940



UNITED KINGDOM, JUNE - OCTOBER 1940

# BATTLE OF BRITAIN

Following the fall of France, Germany set its sights on Britain, and only the men of the Royal Air Force stood in the way

WORDS DAVID SMITH

**F**ew battles have names that resonate as much as that attached to the fighting over the skies of Britain at the end of 1940. At the time, the public viewed the actions of the Royal Air Force both as stirring testament to the grit of the nation, and as a last stand against the might of Nazi Germany.

The fighting between Messerschmitt and Spitfire, and between Hurricane and Heinkel, did not take place in a vacuum. Both the Germans and British knew that it was just the preliminary stage of the planned invasion of England. If the RAF cracked, Britain faced the same fate as Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands and France. A few hundred fighter planes were all that held the German war machine at bay across the Channel.

Despite its importance, the dates encompassing the Battle of Britain are difficult to pin down. Debate continues over when it started and when it finished. This is partly because it blew up and then petered out like a storm, with the most intense and recognisable action taking place through August, September and October of 1940. But Germany's air campaign had started before then, and would continue afterwards.

Further confusion is added by the shifting nature of the campaign. As the Germans looked for a weak spot, they continually changed their emphasis, giving the battle several distinct phases. Battle of Britain Day is commemorated on 15 September, but settling on a definitive start and end date is all but impossible.

In July, Hitler was still hoping that Britain would come to the negotiating table and thrash out the terms for peace. RAF planes were bombing Germany in a disjointed and haphazard manner, but the period was mostly devoted to recovery. Following its exertions in the Battle of France and the retreat from Dunkirk, Fighter Command was gathering itself for the next test. This was expected to come in August.

For the campaign, the Luftwaffe amassed 3,358 planes, with more than a thousand of them fighters. The RAF could counter with similar numbers, but the Germans had a slight edge in

ready-to-fly fighter planes, with 805 compared to the RAF's 715. The resonant phrase 'the few' could fairly be attributed to both sides.

German plans anticipated that the campaign proper would start on 13 August. Hermann Göring spoke of the 'attack of the Eagles' in ominous tones, but missions had actually started the previous month, and 10 July is often put forward as the real start of the battle. It was an uncertain and tentative start. The Luftwaffe took time to feel out Britain's defences, launching exploratory raids on the coast in daylight and venturing further inland under cover of darkness.

The Germans undoubtedly gathered useful intelligence from this opening phase of the battle, but the RAF arguably learned more. Most importantly, British pilots discovered that their doctrine of flying in threes was too rigid when pitted against the loose, two-plane formations of the Germans. Luftwaffe pilots hunted in pairs, with one plane hanging back and covering its partner. The RAF pilots quickly adjusted.

In turn, the Germans learned that their flight formations were faulty. The bombers initially went in with a fighter umbrella above and behind them. This created the opportunity for the bombers to be mauled before the German fighters closed in, so they eventually drew closer to their bombers, until they actually flew in front and on the flanks of their formations. These were just the first of many moves and counter-moves that would punctuate the battle.

In August, the Luftwaffe was tasked with degrading Fighter Command's combat ability by concentrating attacks on its bases, rather than on the planes in the air. It was a potentially devastating tactic, but one that was swiftly countered by the RAF. Bad weather prevented the wholesale implementation of the initiative until 18 August, but 12 August to 6 September saw some of the most intense fighting of the battle. A total of 32 raids were mounted against Fighter Command bases during that period.

The results were surprising. Only 56 British fighters were destroyed on the ground. Initial successes quickly prompted the RAF

A squadron of German Messerschmitt fighters cross the English Channel

Supermarine Spitfires, the most famous RAF planes of the entire war, bask in the sun's rays

## The Battle of Britain

June–September 1940

	Fighter Command group headquarters
	Luftlotte headquarters
	RAF sector airfield
	Fliegerkorps headquarters
	Other airfield
<b>A</b>	RAF sector
	RAF group boundary
	RAF sector boundary
	Observer corps
	High level radar station
	Low level radar station
	High level radar range
	Low level radar range
	Balloon barrage
	British Army Deployment
	35 Allied army division
	21 Allied army brigade
	XX 21 Allied armoured division
	36 Allied infantry brigade
	Anti-aircraft battery (number of guns where known)
	Luftlotte boundary
	Fliegerkorps boundary
	Luftlotte boundary
	Fliegerkorps boundary
	German fighter range
	German Army Deployment and Operation Sealion invasion plan
	XXXX German army group
	XX German army
	XXX 37 German corps
	Proposed invasion route
	Primary German objective in England
	Secondary German objective in England
	Convoys
	Transport fleets
	Naval ports



*A view from the nose of a Heinkel He 111 bomber during the battle*

to disperse their planes, adopt improved camouflage techniques and even house planes at remote airfields. A significant portion of the available fighter strength was also dedicated to protecting the bases, with patrols mounted to limit the possibility of surprise attacks (the planes of 10 and 12 Groups were held back to guard the airfields, while those of 11 Group tackled the raiders).

Importantly, the Germans believed their attacks had been far more effective than they actually had. With an invasion date of 15 September in mind, they congratulated themselves on putting eight Fighter Command bases out of action. In reality, although several bases were damaged and forced to cease operations for short periods, none were permanently knocked out.

Overestimating their successes perhaps led the Germans to persevere with a failing tactic for too long. By September, they believed they had whittled British fighter numbers down to just 100. In truth, there were 701 fighters available on 1 September, and this number was steadily rising. It reached 738 on the sixth of that month.

In reality, neither side found it possible to accurately track enemy losses, but British overestimations were a boost to morale, while German errors obscured the futility of their methods. In fact, it was a remarkably even contest, and both sides were finding themselves worn down by the ceaseless fighting. RAF fighter numbers may have been rising, but that was only because production of new planes was holding at an impressive level. New pilots were also funnelled into the maelstrom at the rate of more than 300 per month.

By the end of August, it was German pilots who were showing signs of 'nervous exhaustion'. Their losses were also harder to make good. A German pilot shot down over Britain would either

die or spend the rest of the war in a POW camp, while an RAF pilot had a fighting chance of being back in a plane the next day. This reality led to the practice of German pilots machine-gunning their RAF counterparts as they parachuted down to earth. Though an unpleasant facet of the battle, both sides agreed that it was acceptable under the rules of war.

Much has been written on the superiority of British planes to those employed by the Germans. An early casualty of the battle had been the fearsome Stuka. A propagandist's dream, the screaming divebomber had been the scourge of continental Europe, but was unsuited to tackling RAF fighters. Devastating losses saw it pulled out of the fray in August.

Elsewhere, things weren't so clear-cut. The Spitfire was certainly an exceptional aircraft, but during these early stages of the war it had its weaknesses. Most obvious was its reliance on .303 machine guns. Packing four in each wing sounds formidable, but such small bullets often had little effect on a target, especially if fired from long range. To make matters worse, a Spitfire only carried enough for around 15 seconds of firing.

The Messerschmitt Bf 109, by comparison, had a pair of 20mm cannons, as well as machine guns and carried significantly more ammunition. It was also the superior flying machine at high altitudes. The result was that the RAF lost a higher number of fighters than the Luftwaffe, but the Germans also suffered crippling bomber losses. From 7-15 September, the Luftwaffe lost almost 300 aircraft. Fewer than 100 of those were fighters, while the RAF lost 120 fighter planes.

By this point, the battle had entered another new phase. On 4 September, Hitler ordered Luftwaffe attacks to focus on British cities.

This was not a concerted terror campaign. Targets were limited to legitimate industrial

and military installations, but accuracy was impossible with the technology of the day. Damage to civilian buildings was inevitable, and the death toll among the British population began to climb.

On 15 September, remembered now as Battle of Britain Day, the Luftwaffe mounted a massive raid, with 200 bombers and an armada of fighter escorts. The RAF claimed to have shot down 185 aircraft – a wildly optimistic number that may simply have been made up for propaganda purposes. In fact, 60 German planes were lost (34 bombers and 26 fighters), but even this lower level of attrition was unsustainable. The German high command took the only option now available: it switched to night-time raids.

As the Battle of Britain merged with the Blitz, the greatest weakness of the Luftwaffe became apparent. The lack of a heavy bomber was critical. Germany's medium bombers lacked the hitting power of the monsters the Allies would unleash over German cities later in the war.

Despite this, German losses dropped as their formations now had to compete with less impressive British night-fighters, including the Bristol Blenheim, the Boulton-Paul Defiant and the Bristol Beaufighter.

By this point, however, the Battle of Britain had been won and lost. German invasion plans were shelved, never to be realised. The exact end of the battle is as debated as the exact start, but with the invasion called off, the ultimate goal of Nazi Germany had been denied.

Losses had been astonishingly even, with the RAF losing over 1,700 planes and the Luftwaffe more than 1,900. The Blitz would see tens of thousands of civilians die, but Hitler would become distracted by his plans to invade the Soviet Union. His great effort to crack the British and knock them out of the war had failed.

## BATTLE OF BRITAIN

The Blitz September 1940 – May 1941

#### → German air attacks

### **Eastern Civil defense region**

 Evacuation area

 Neutral area

### Neutral state

Direction of X-Gerät beam

Civil defense regional

#### Reception area

 German occupied

Subject to heavy bombing

SOVIET UNION, JUNE - DECEMBER 1941

# OPERATION BARBAROSSA

The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union shocked the world and began  
the bloodiest front of the Second World War



In the summer of 1940, most of western Europe was under the boot of a rampant Wehrmacht. Though Hitler's pact with the Soviet Union seemingly remained strong, on 31 July 1940 he described his plans for war with Stalin. "The sooner Russia is crushed, the better," he said. "If we were to start in May 1941, we would have five months to finish the job."

The Nazi leader directed the OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, the high command of the armed forces) to begin planning the invasion, codenamed Barbarossa after the famed Holy Roman Emperor, for 15 May 1941. The operation would see three army groups (North, Centre and South) storming into Soviet territory under the leadership of Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, Fedor von Bock and Gerd von Rundstedt. Von Leeb's forces were tasked with taking the Baltics and Leningrad; von Bock's men were to head first to Smolensk and then advance towards Moscow;

Rundstedt was ordered to race to secure the 'breadbasket' of Ukraine and the oil-rich Caucasus. Certain of victory, Hitler boasted: "We only have to kick the door in and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down."

In the wake of Stalin's purges in the late 1930s, the Soviet forces were woefully short on both morale and efficiency. To compound this, Stalin insisted on controlling the placement of his divisions, further restricting the Red Army. In April 1941, he was even warned of the Germans' intentions by Winston Churchill. The following month, Richard Sorge, a Soviet spy working in Japan, informed Moscow that Germany was indeed planning to attack. Amazingly, even when Sorge provided a date of 20 June 1941 (just two days off the actual launch date of 22 June), Stalin remained implacable, insisting that Hitler was not "such an idiot" as to risk a war on two fronts. Less than a month after receiving Sorge's report, Stalin would be proven spectacularly wrong.

*German troops made rapid gains during the initial stages of Operation Barbarossa, but their success didn't last*



© Alamy

At 3.15am on 22 June, thousands of German aircraft engines burst into life. The Luftwaffe targets were Soviet airfields, destroying stationary fighters before they could even take off. Soon, millions of troops were marching across the border. Within two days, many of the 49 German Panzer battalions had penetrated up to 80km into Soviet territory. By 28 June over 400,000 Soviet troops were encircled outside of Minsk as the Second Panzer Group, under General Heinz Guderian, linked up with Hermann Hoth's Third Panzer Group.

To the north, General von Leeb was faring well, his troops hailed as emancipators by some of the violently suppressed peoples of the Baltics. Meanwhile Army Group South, charged with taking Kiev before moving on to the Caucasus, faced determined resistance. Rundstedt was attacking the most heavily defended region, including KV and T-34 tanks, and while the central and northern thrusts of the German army continued to slice into Soviet territory, he found himself increasingly bogged down. Rundstedt's failure to keep up with the rest would ultimately prove fatal for Hitler's hopes of a rapid victory.

By 13 July the Axis armies had advanced between 300km and 600km, claiming over 589,000 Soviets killed or captured. The Wehrmacht was edging ever closer to Moscow, and the First Battle of Smolensk was about to finish with the entrapment of almost 760,000 Soviet troops. On Saturday, 19 July 1941, Hitler issued an order that the Soviet armies trapped around Smolensk (the 16th, 19th and 20th) were to be utterly destroyed before Army Group Centre advanced, not towards Moscow, but south to the outskirts of Kiev to aid Army Group South, which was still 80km outside of the Ukrainian capital.

Though Halder and von Bock were adamant that Moscow should remain their priority, Hitler was unmoved. On 23 August, Army Group Centre swung south. Three weeks later its southern counterpart started to drive north, and on 16 September two more Soviet armies were annihilated as the pincer closed east of Kiev. Stalin's order that the city be held at all costs condemned over 700,000 Soviet troops to encirclement.

Still progressing steadily in the north, forces under the command of von Leeb had sealed

off the city of Leningrad eight days prior to the encirclement of Kiev. The city had been a primary objective during the planning of Barbarossa and now its people were to be starved into submission during a siege that would last until January 1944, claiming over 800,000 lives.

After the resistance around Kiev had been removed, Army Group Centre moved once again to Moscow. Stalin gave the defence of the city to General Georgy Zhukov, a formidable figure who had overseen the desperate efforts to counter the Siege of Leningrad. Zhukov wasted little time in putting the men and women of Moscow to work excavating defensive trenches and anti-tank ditches (nearly three million cubic metres of earth was moved by hand). The factories that continued to function (much of the Soviets' industry had been evacuated east) were also turned to military tasks (a clock-maker was asked to begin building mine detonators). If the Germans were to take Moscow, Zhukov was determined they would pay dearly for every street.

## "WHILE THE RAIN WAS A FRUSTRATION, THE FREEZING TEMPERATURES THAT FOLLOWED WERE A DEATH SENTENCE"

Codename Operation Typhoon, the assault on Moscow began on 2 October 1941. At the outset of the attack the Germans enjoyed a 2:1 superiority in tanks and troops and a 3:1 advantage in aircraft. On 8 October the yearly deluge of weather known as the rasputitsa – meaning the season without roads – began to churn the roads into quagmires. By the end of the month the Wehrmacht was still 80km from its target. Yet while the rain was a frustration, the freezing temperatures that followed were a death sentence.

By 5 December the Germans were forced to halt short of Moscow as the conditions froze both men and machines. The lack of proper winter clothing – a result of Hitler's assurances that the campaign would be over in a matter of weeks – condemned thousands to death.

# BARBAROSSA

22 JUNE – 5 DECEMBER

## 01 22 JUNE

German Army Groups North Centre and South advance east after sustained attacks from the Luftwaffe on Soviet airfields, taking air superiority to cover the advance.

## 02 22 JUNE

Two Romanian armies press into Ukraine with the objective of capturing Odessa. Over 650,000 Romanian and Finnish soldiers take part in the initial attack.

## 03 3 JULY

Volkovysk and then Minsk are taken as German forces encircle the Red Army and take 324,000 prisoners.

## 04 10 JULY

While the Romanians advance in the south, the Finnish army moves towards the Karelian Isthmus. In total, 300,000 Finnish soldiers joined in the fight against the USSR.

## 05 16 JULY

Smolensk is taken by the Germans. Resistance lasted in the city until 5 August. By 1 September, the frontline extended as far as Leningrad in the north and Crimea in the south.

## 06 16 SEPTEMBER

Kiev falls after Soviet troops become trapped in a pocket east of the city. A month later, the Germans reach Bryansk and Belgorod.

## 07 2 OCTOBER

An all-out assault on Moscow begins. The Germans manage to fight their way to the capital's suburbs but ultimately fail to take the city as winter sets in.

## 08 16 NOVEMBER

Sevastopol falls to the Axis forces. The capture of Crimea means the Germans can later launch an assault on the oil fields of the Caucasus.

## 09 5 DECEMBER

Poor weather conditions and Soviet reinforcements take their toll on the Axis invaders. Operation Barbarossa ends having failed to force the Soviet Union to capitulate.

A German soldier wields a Flammenwerfern during the summer of 1941



**KEY**

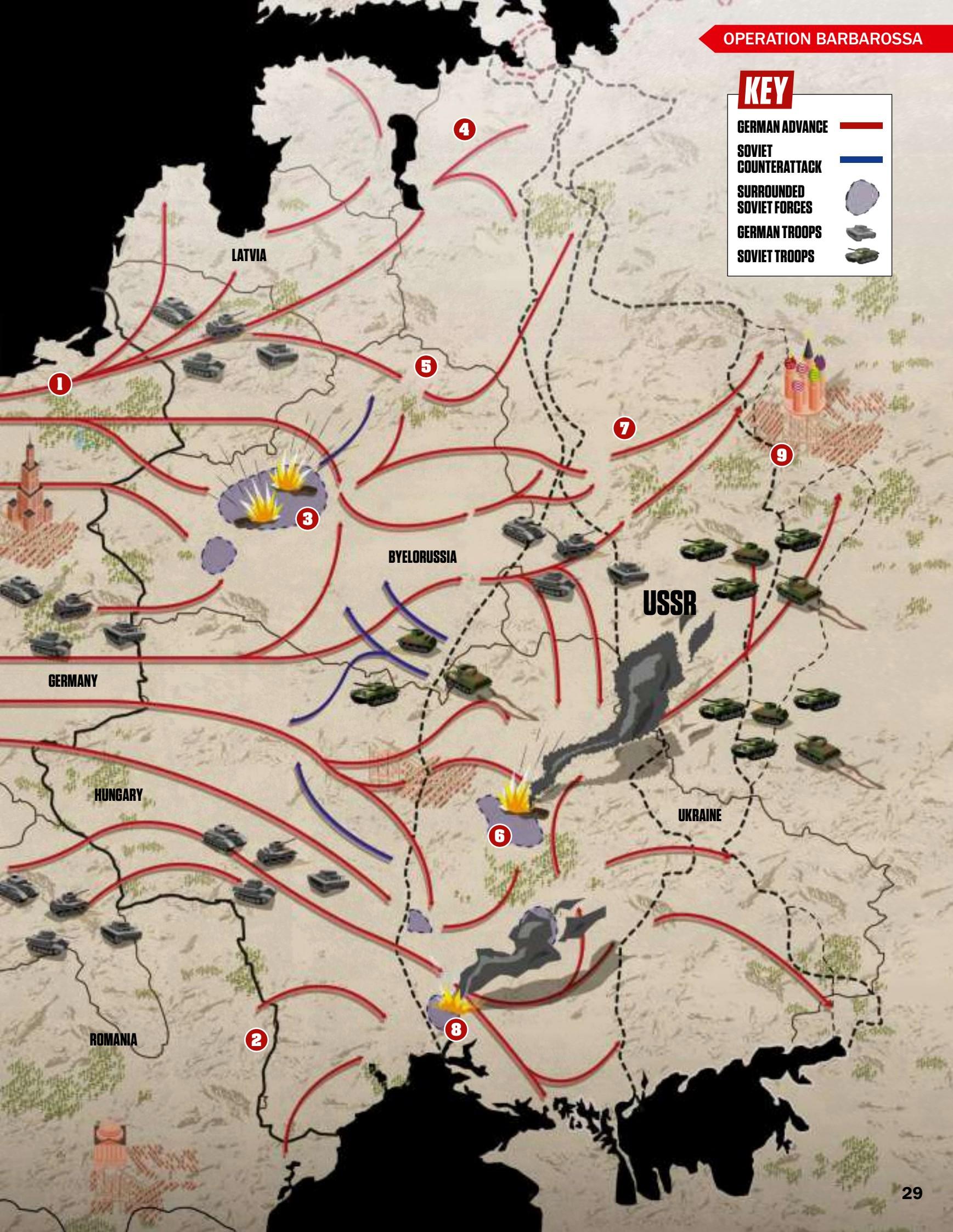
GERMAN ADVANCE —————

SOVIET COUNTERATTACK —————

SURROUNDED SOVIET FORCES

GERMAN TROOPS

SOVIET TROOPS



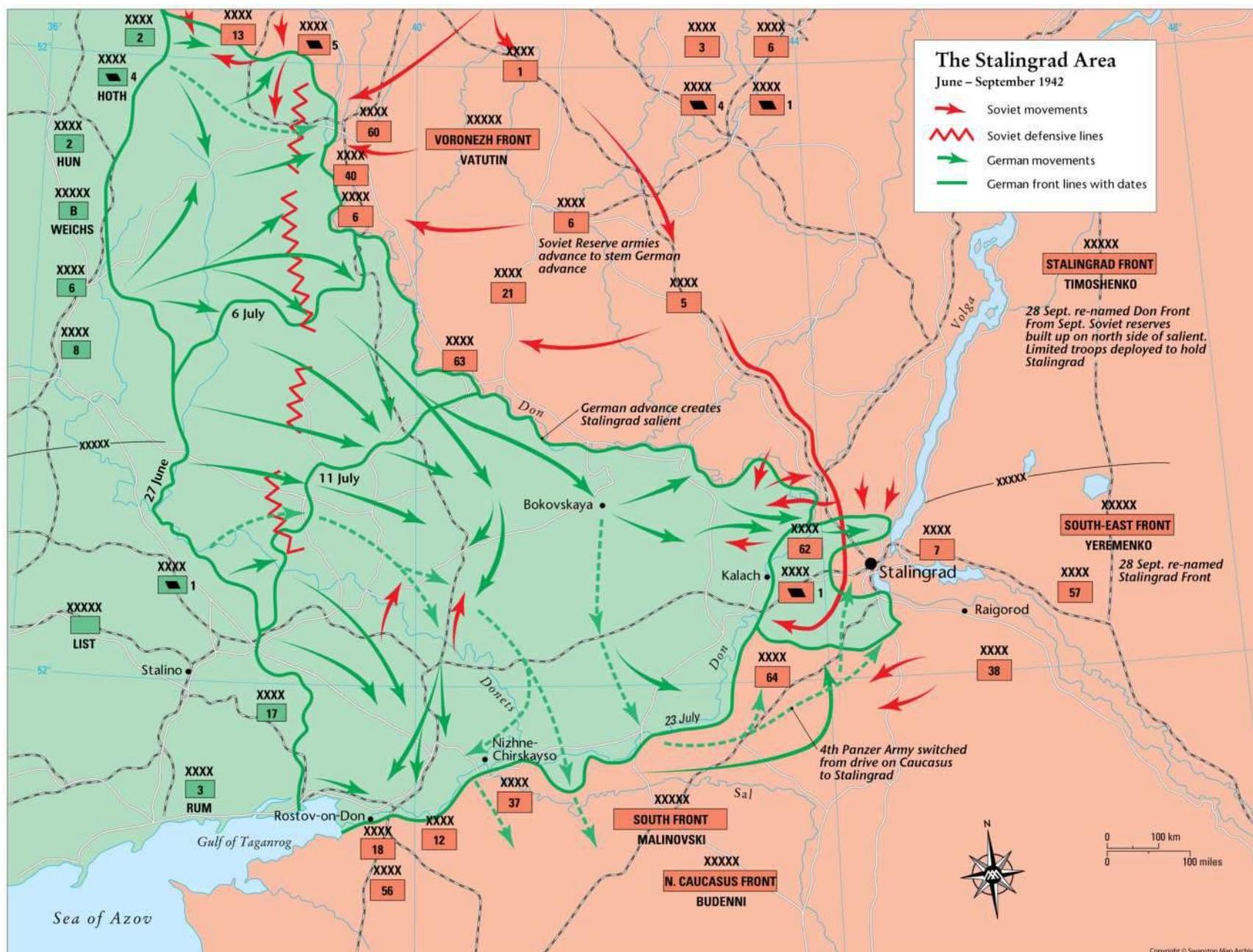


Image: Map Archive



SOVIET UNION, AUGUST 1942 - FEBRUARY 1943

# THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD

The outcome of WWII and the fate of the Third Reich was decided in the bloodied ruins of Stalingrad

WORDS CHARLES GINGER

**O**ne of the most pivotal battles of World War II was fought in the Soviet city of Stalingrad. While not the most strategically vital location for either side, its very name made it a point of obsession for both Hitler and Stalin. When the guns finally fell silent among the ruins in February 1943, over a million Wehrmacht and Soviet soldiers, not to mention innocent Soviet civilians, lay dead.

The idea of Stalingrad's capture began to germinate in Hitler's mind in April 1942, following the petering out of the Soviet counteroffensive that prevented the Wehrmacht taking Moscow. The objective was to take the city before racing on to secure the oilfields in the Caucasus

beyond, simultaneously securing a vital supply for the German armies while cutting off the Soviet's access to it. With the Soviet offensive at Kharkov defeated in May, the path to Stalingrad lay open.

As General Timoschenko's battered forces retreated in the face of two German Panzer armies (the 17th under Ewald von Kleist and the 6th under Friedrich Paulus) a Stalingrad Front was declared by the Soviets, which they frantically raced to fill with reserve forces from Moscow. The race was on to adequately prepare the city for the German onslaught. But it would not just be the soldiers who would be required to defend Stalingrad.

Almost 200,000 civilians were mobilised and organised into workers columns to dig anti-tank ditches up to six feet deep while army sappers laid mines. Even schoolchildren were deployed to construct earth walls around the precious petrol tanks along the Volga River. Anti-aircraft batteries were formed by young women, with guns situated on both banks of the Volga in order to defend vital positions such as the Bektevka power station and the infamous Tractor Factory, which had been converted to build the much-feared T-34 tanks. Every single pair of hands would be needed if total annihilation was to be averted.

Overall command of the operation to save Stalingrad fell to the ruthless General Vasiliy Chuikov. Notorious for his incredibly explosive temper, Chuikov worked tirelessly to raise the morale of his beleaguered troops while instilling terror into any commanders that dared to imagine retreat. Any deserters would be shot.

Chuikov's approach to the perilous situation was simple: "Time is blood." The longer the coming battle raged, the more it would cost the Germans. Every obstacle was to be placed in their way. Even immobile tanks were dug into positions

to provide fire. If Stalingrad was to be taken, it would be inch by blood-soaked inch.

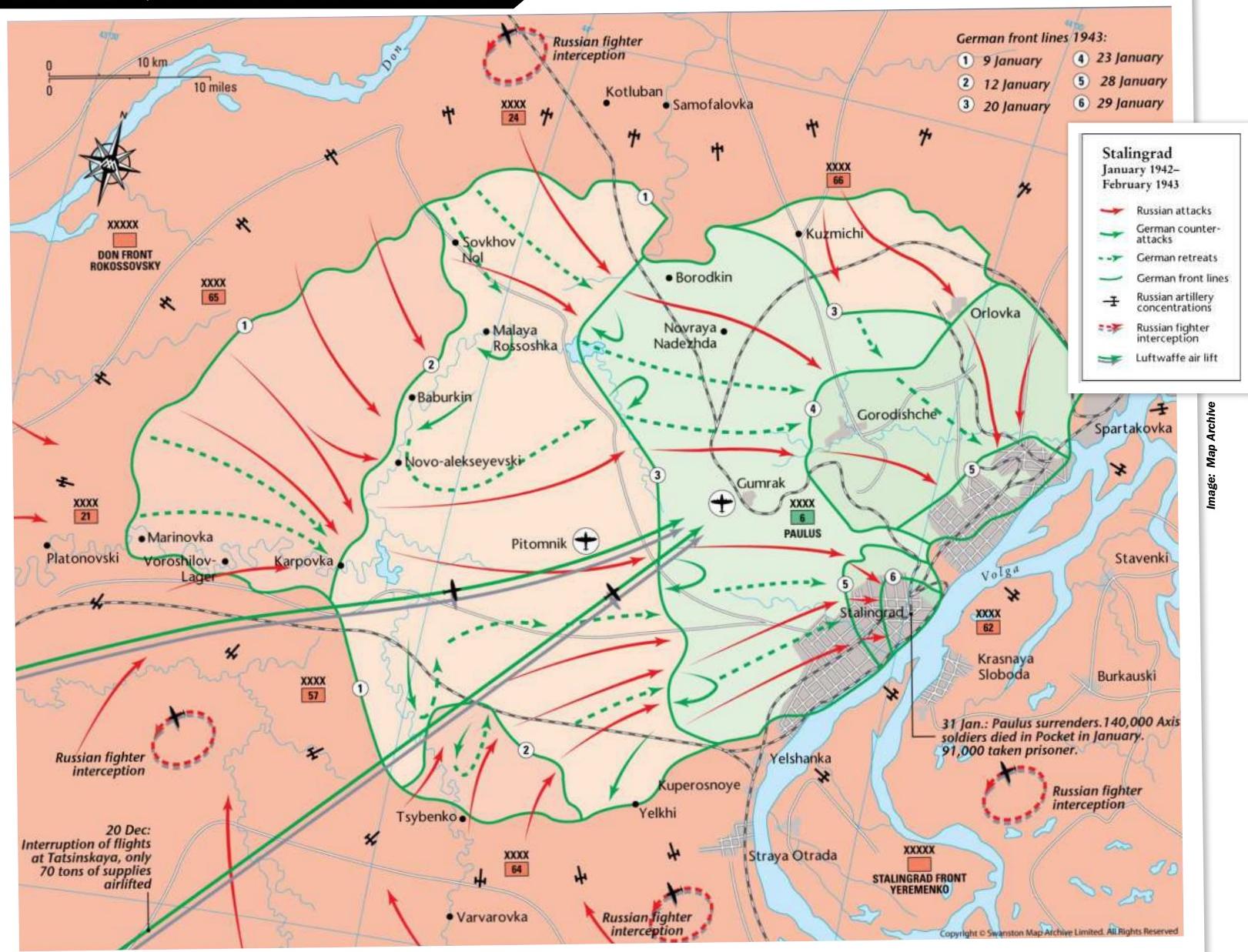
Having battled across the Don River on 21 August, the Germans began their assault on Stalingrad on 23 August even before they'd reached the Volga. Under the command of General von Richthofen, the entire 4th Air Fleet, comprising 1,200 aircraft (both Junkers 88 and Heinkel 111 bombers) headed for Stalingrad to ignite a biblical inferno. In a total of 1,600 sorties, Richthofen's pilots dropped approximately 1,000 tons of explosives, losing only three planes in the process. Thousands of civilians died in the carnage, still in the city due to Stalin's refusal to evacuate them for fear of spreading mass panic. Wooden houses were reduced to ash as apartment blocks were either gutted or collapsed entirely. By indiscriminately carpet-bombing the entire city, the Luftwaffe hit the hospital, waterworks and telephone lines, as well as bombing the petrol tanks lining the river, sending flames 1,500 feet into the blackened sky above the city.

With what was to become a lengthy bombardment now underway, the 16th Panzer Division surged across the steppe towards the city. Despite the valiant efforts of the anti-aircraft batteries, who rained 37mm shells down upon the invaders, the Panzer crews pressed on, aided by Stuka aircraft. By the afternoon of the 23rd they reached the Volga.

Confident that such a pulverising would have broken the Soviet's will and ability to resist, the Germans anticipated a relatively swift victory. But in a dark twist of irony, they had actually helped to sow the seeds of their own downfall. The churned-up remains of Stalingrad would prove to be a cramped killing field in which snipers and close-quarters fighting ruled. This was no place for the rapid, sweeping manoeuvres favoured by the German invaders.



Sergeant Yakov Fedotovich Pavlov became a hero after his platoon recaptured and defended a building that came to be known as 'Pavlov's House'



In the days that followed the terror bombing, General Hoth's forces slowly trudged forwards, pushing the Russian 64th Army back. Emboldened by the relatively weak Soviet resistance in the lead up to the assault, Paulus decided to send his men straight into the fray upon their arrival instead of allowing them to rest and recuperate. As German soldiers fed into the rubble-strewn streets, so too did the Soviet reinforcements.

The situation facing the Soviets was utterly dire, so desperate in fact, that as their men ran towards the enemy, machine gun posts were set up behind them. Their choice was clear: die fighting or die retreating. The fact that they had to rely on supplies shipped across the Volga under heavy German fire didn't help either.

Working in tandem with their pilot colleagues, the Panzers continued to fight their way through the city, all the while conscious of the vulnerability of their tanks in the narrow streets. By 31 August, the Germans were at the Stalingrad-Morozask railway. Paulus now firmly believed that the Russian 62nd and 64th armies could be divided and finished off.

The arrival of Marshal Georgy Zhukov two days earlier had again revealed the scale of the task facing the Soviets. Morale was collapsing under the strain of the German aerial bombardment, with one divisional commander resorting to lining up his men and shooting every tenth one until his gun ran out. Just as the Soviets were preparing to unleash a counterattack in an attempt to stem the Panzer advance, Zhukov began imploring Stalin to delay it.

The marshal discovered the troops assigned to the job were poorly equipped, low on ammunition and predominantly made up of old reservists. Yet despite the obvious flaws in the Red Army, Stalin became increasingly nervous, citing the encroachment of German tanks as the reason that any delay could prove fatal. Zhukov did eventually succeed in gaining an extra two days, but they made little difference, for the advance that proceeded was a short-lived one.

The 1st Guards Army only managed to push on a few miles into the Russian steppe, while the 24th Army literally found itself back at square one, having totally failed to gain any ground. However, the attack had not been completely in

vain. It had forced Paulus to divert his reserve forces just as the shattered remains of the 62nd and 64th armies were pushed back to the perimeters of the city. The Germans had paid heavily, losing six battalion commanders in a single day and seeing many companies decimated, some left with as few as 40 men.

From grenades to Molotov cocktails, the Soviets used all available means. Many rushed into the fray without weapons, forced to wait until a comrade fell before taking their rifle. It's no surprise that the life expectancy for a soldier arriving in the city was less than 24 hours.

With fewer than 40,000 fighters left to confront the 6th Army and 4th Panzer Army, the Germans believed that it was simply a matter of time before Stalingrad would fall.

Following a summit with Hitler in his Vinnitsa headquarters, Paulus unleashed the next major assault on 12 September. With yet another artillery bombardment and bombing attack having pounded the city beforehand, the Wehrmacht began to make progress, fighting their way towards the Mamayev Kurgan, a mound overlooking the Volga, also known as Hill 102 on



Bombing raids and their attendant firestorms left Stalingrad a pulverised ruin, but the city fought on

account of its height in metres. Soldiers pressed on to the railway station as Hoth's Panzer and infantry troops aimed for the grain elevator.

Stalin ordered that men be sent across the Volga to secure the west bank. The 13th Guards Division lined up to await the journey under German fire. Those that reached the bank leapt from the boats to rush the enemy, knowing that the slightest delay meant death. Close-quarter combat ensued as reinforcements poured in from both sides. The hill was strategically vital; its loss would allow the Germans to control the entire river, across which all of the Soviet supplies had to travel.

The further the Germans advanced, the stiffer the resistance they encountered. Every single building had to be fought for, with numerous tales of grossly outnumbered men holding out against wave upon wave of attacks. One of the most well-known examples is Pavlov's House, which is said to have cost the Germans more men than the entire thrust into France. In such encounters flamethrowers proved very effective, but it was the snipers, such as the famed Vasily Zaitsev, that reigned supreme among the rubble. Appropriately, the German name for this merciless fighting was Rattenkrieg (Rat War).

By early October, the Germans began their assault on the factory district to the north of the city. Many of these installations, including the Red October Complex and the Tractor Factory, had been turned into fortresses, and these changed hands many times as the battle ebbed and flowed. In some instances, the Panthers resorted to ramming the buildings to gain entry.

The key positions were finally in German hands come the end of October, but the price paid for them was nothing short of catastrophic. The

last heave of the attack has been curtailed by a rain of Katyusha and mortar fire. Just as winter approached the Wehrmacht found itself running out of steam, bled almost dry.

A final attempt at a decisive breakthrough came on 11 November. As the Luftwaffe obliterated the factory chimneys, infantry seized buildings from the enemy, only to relinquish them shortly after. Burning tanks littered the streets as the Soviets dug in, some down to their last rounds. Such was their determination, a band of 15 men held off a thrust towards the petrol tanks on the Volga. The tenacity of these courageous men led the Germans to believe that they were fighting "creatures". And it would be these seemingly superhuman warriors that would soon wreak an almighty revenge.

Thanks to the movement of industry back beyond the Volga, Soviet factories were continuing to produce an immense amount of weaponry. Some estimates place monthly tank production, including the much-feared T-34, at 2,200. Hitler not only underestimated his enemy's industrial capacity, he also genuinely believed them to be exhausted and at the very end of their strength.

This hubris made the thunderclap of Operation Uranus all the more stunning. The supposedly spent Soviets had in fact been secretly amassing a gargantuan force with which to launch a staggeringly ambitious flanking attack of brutal simplicity. A main assault force would set off over 100 miles west of Stalingrad, while another horde of troops struck out from south of the Don River as an armoured thrust launched from the south of the charred city. On the morning of 19 November, a huge Soviet bombardment opened fire as the snow fell. The Germans, supported by Italian and

## DEFENDING PAVLOV'S HOUSE

The siege of Pavlov's House (named after Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, who contributed to the building's defence) cost the Germans dearly and became a symbol of the Red Army's will to resist.

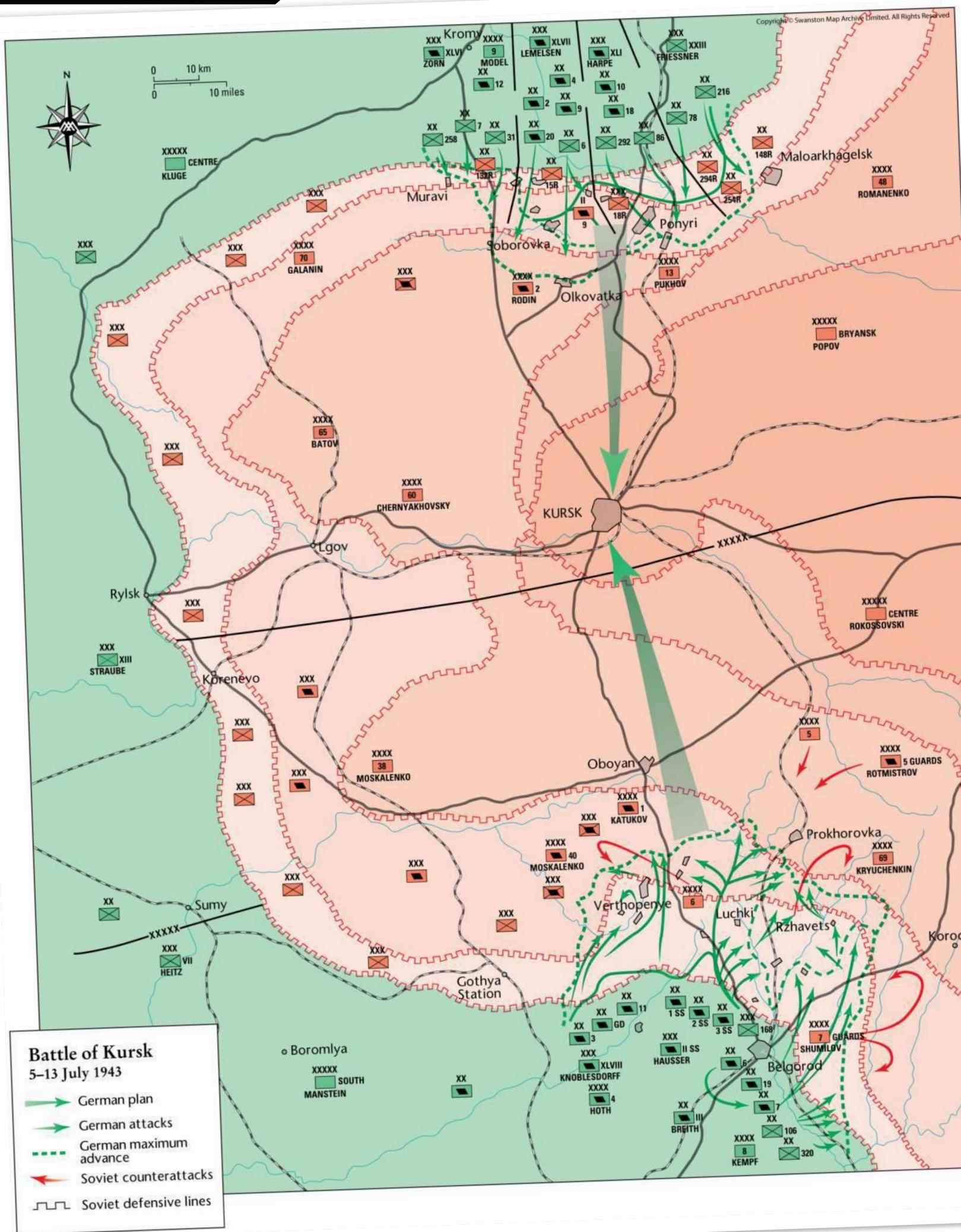
Having retaken the four-storey building from the Germans, the soldiers of the 13th Guards Division positioned machine guns in every window and ringed the building with barbed wire and mines. They also discovered that an anti-tank gun on the roof of the building was too high up for the German tanks to fire on.

Overlooking the Volga (from which supplies were brought to the house via a trench), the defenders had a clear view to the north, south and west for half a mile. From 27 September until 25 November they managed to repel waves of German assaults until they were relieved by reinforcements.



Romanian troops, didn't know what hit them. The encirclement of the 6th Army had begun, and it would culminate in its destruction. Hitler's refusal to allow Paulus' men to retreat, combined with Goering's insistence that the Luftwaffe could keep the entrapped soldiers supplied, cemented their doom. By the first days of February 1943, Stalingrad was silent.

The horrific battle for the city is the bloodiest in human history and bore witness to animalistic fighting. In the words of Winston Churchill, "Stalingrad was the end of the beginning". It proved to be a traumatic reversal from which the Wehrmacht never fully recovered. The Red Army would march for Berlin. With over two years of conflict ahead, the outcome of World War II had been settled in the ruins of Stalin's city, the fate of Hitler's Third Reich permanently sealed.



SOVIET UNION, JULY - AUGUST 1943

# THE BATTLE OF KURSK

As the German invasion of the Soviet Union stalled, two mechanised heavyweights came face to face in the largest clash of armour the world has ever seen

WORDS WILL LAWRENCE

**T**he last major German offensive on the Eastern Front, 1943's Operation Citadel saw Hitler launch a colossal attack on the Kursk salient, or bulge. It was a move that he believed would provide a victory so bright it would "shine like a beacon around the world." This was a battle of the elite, with both German and Soviet armies near their apex in terms of skill and weaponry, hardened by two years of unrelenting warfare.

The Germans, though depleted in manpower, were, for the first time since the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, fielding qualitative superiority in terms of armour with the formidable Tiger I tanks

and new Panthers. These outstripped the Soviet T-34 Model 43s, which had in the intervening years, with their sloped armour and 76.2mm gun, proved masters of the battlefield.

The Red Army, meanwhile, was a very different beast from that which had faced the German invasion during Operation Barbarossa two years earlier. At the beginning of 1943, more than 16 million men were under arms, supported by a vast number of artillery pieces. Stalin claimed that "artillery is the god of war", and by 1943, the Red Army boasted the largest and most effective artillery divisions in the world. It also had somewhere approaching 10,000 tanks.

At Kursk, these two heavily mechanised forces came together in an enclosed theatre of operations, like two mighty pugilists meeting for a final championship bout. The result was a watershed. "Stalingrad was the end of the beginning," said Winston Churchill, "but the Battle of Kursk was the beginning of the end."

The German plan was to launch a double envelopment against the Kursk salient using Army Group Centre in the north, specifically Colonel-General Model's Ninth Army, while Army Group South battered the southern section with Army Detachment Kempf and Colonel-General Hoth's formidable Fourth Panzer Army. This was a strong



Soviet soldiers wait as a T-34 crosses a trench



**"IN FACT, THE GERMAN HIGH COMMAND WAS USING SIMILAR TACTICS TO THOSE EMPLOYED BY MONTGOMERY AT EL ALAMEIN"**

demonstration of German strength, with 2,700 tanks and assault guns taking to the field.

For Stalin and his senior army commanders, Marshals Zhukov and Vasilevsky, the plan was to launch a massive offensive by first wearing down the mobile German forces in a battle-slog around the Kursk sector. They would use three Fronts (the Soviet equivalent of an Army Group) – Central Front, Voronezh Front and the reserve Steppe Front – to grind down German mechanised forces and thereby leave their territories vulnerable to huge counteroffensives.

In his bid to snare the German armour, Stalin ordered the transformation of the region into what historian and Kursk expert Dennis E Showalter believes to be “the most formidable large-scale defensive system in the history of warfare”: a triple-ringed matrix absorbing almost 1 million men, 20,000 guns and mortars, 300 rocket launchers and 3,300 tanks. Russian engineers uncoiled more than 500 miles of barbed wire and lay almost 650,000 mines. The Germans’ only chance, says Showalter, was the might of the steel-headed sledgehammer they eventually swung in July.

That blow came on 5 July, after several days of preliminaries involving the German and Soviet

air forces and the roar of countless heavy guns. Tank armadas were suddenly on the move, with the Germans committing squadrons of 100 and in some cases 200 machines or more, with a score of Tiger Is and Ferdinand assault guns in the vanguard. Groups of 50 or so medium tanks came next and then floods of infantry, protected by this armoured screen, moved in behind.

These German armoured wedges were known as ‘Panzerkeil’ and, according to the late historian Alan Clark, amount to a rejection of the traditional principles of the panzer army. In fact, the German high command was using similar tactics to those employed by Montgomery at El Alamein, with the difference here that the defenders’ armour was at numerical parity with the attackers’, or greater, and their defensive organisation meant that many of their tanks were held in reserve. This proved decisive during the mighty clash at Prokhorovka.

As 5 July unfolded, Colonel-General Model in the north committed more than 500 armoured vehicles from his Ninth Army to the attack in a series of staggered bursts, but so violent was the Soviet resistance that about half of these were out of action by the day’s end. Part of the problem stemmed from the committing of both battalions

of the Porsche-built Ferdinands to the attack. These were formidable machines, also known as ‘elephants’, were designed for tank-busting and the destruction of large anti-tank guns. Their 200mm-thick armour provided them with ample protection from static gun positions. Their enormous 88mm cannons, meanwhile, picked off Russian T-34s before they even had chance to come within range.

However, the Ferdinands became separated from the lighter tanks and infantry they needed for close-range support. With their static hulls and lack of machine guns, they proved sitting ducks for Soviet infantry units, who boarded them while they were on the move and squirted flamethrowers over the engine ventilation slats. The Ferdinands, however, ploughed through the first line of Soviet defences, allowing the infantry to follow them into the breach, but more than half these beasts of war were lost.

The morning of 5 July also saw the Fourth Panzer Army launch its main offensive thrust in the south, moving along a 30-mile front. According to Kursk expert Mark Healey, 700 tanks and assault guns smashed their huge metal fist into the face of the Soviet Sixth Guards Army on the Voronezh Front, but the Russian defences were so tightly entrenched that the German attack stalled.

## “THEY PROVED SITTING DUCKS FOR SOVIET INFANTRY UNITS, WHO BOARDED THEM WHILE THEY WERE ON THE MOVE AND SQUIRTED FLAMETHROWERS OVER THE ENGINE VENTILATION SLATS”

*German heavy armour crosses a Soviet defensive ditch near Belgorod*



Eventually, the Luftwaffe's aerial superiority began to take effect and the Fourth Panzer managed to split the Sixth Guards Army in two.

The fighting in both the north and south of the salient was ferocious, and within 12 hours both sides were feeding the fires that raged across the battle for Kursk. Swathes of ground-attack aircraft strafed the battlefields. The armour continued to mass and move "on a scale unlike anything seen elsewhere in the war," according to the eminent historian John Erickson.

The Soviet tank armies responded to the German assault by moving up into their primary defensive positions and somewhere approaching 7,000 tanks were steadily drawn into this immense clash of steel, leaving an ever-growing number of dying hulls smoking on the battlefields. A Russian communiqué claimed that on the first day of battle, 586 German panzers were destroyed or disabled.

The second day of Citadel, 6 July, was heavily overcast and rain hampered both sides throughout. Along the northern sections of the Kursk salient, the Soviets launched a dawn counterattack with General Rokossovsky's Central Front enjoying temporary success, until a force of 250 panzers with infantry moving in its wake halted them in their tracks. Throughout the day, Central Front and the Ninth Army were locked in perpetual struggle.

The German offensive rolled on, with Model aiming for the village of Olkhovatka as a prime strategic objective. This high ground provided control over the eastern, southern and western section of his field of operations. The Soviets had already identified this region as strategically vital, and in the weeks running up to Citadel's launch, had transformed it into one of the strongest sections of the defensive belt. The German Panzerkeil, with the Tigers to the fore, thrust ahead, and by noon on 6 July the Germans had no fewer than 1,000 tanks committed to a six-mile front between the villages of Soborovka and Pomyri.

The Russian defences again proved too strong. Time and time again, Model's Panzer Corps ran into trouble. Unperturbed, he tried again on 7 and 8 July, redeploying huge swathes of aircraft in a bid to penetrate the Soviet resistance. The Soviets were just too well dug in, however, and the German attack ground to a halt once more. "The wrack of shattered panzers marking Ninth Army's advance," writes Healey, bear "mute testament to fact that the momentum of Model's offensive was already beginning to decay."

Meanwhile, along the southern stretch of the Kursk salient, the second day of Citadel's operations looked promising for the Germans. The elite section of Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army, II SS Panzer Corps, had already bitten into the first line of Soviet defence and looked set to devour the second line on the morning of 6 July.

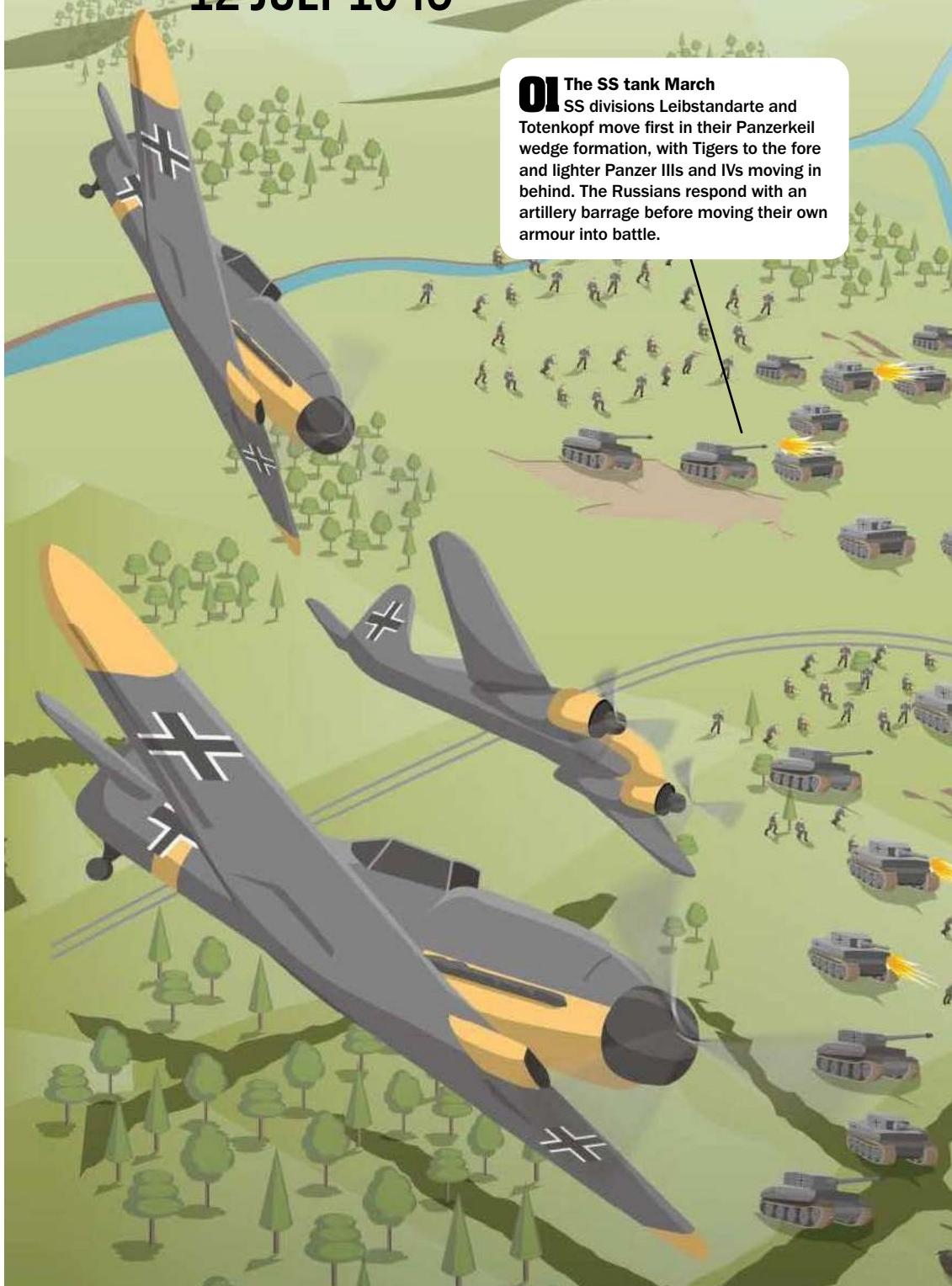
General Vatutin, commanding the Voronezh Front, suggested an immediate counterattack, but was swiftly deflected by a senior officer who highlighted the destruction caused by the Tigers'

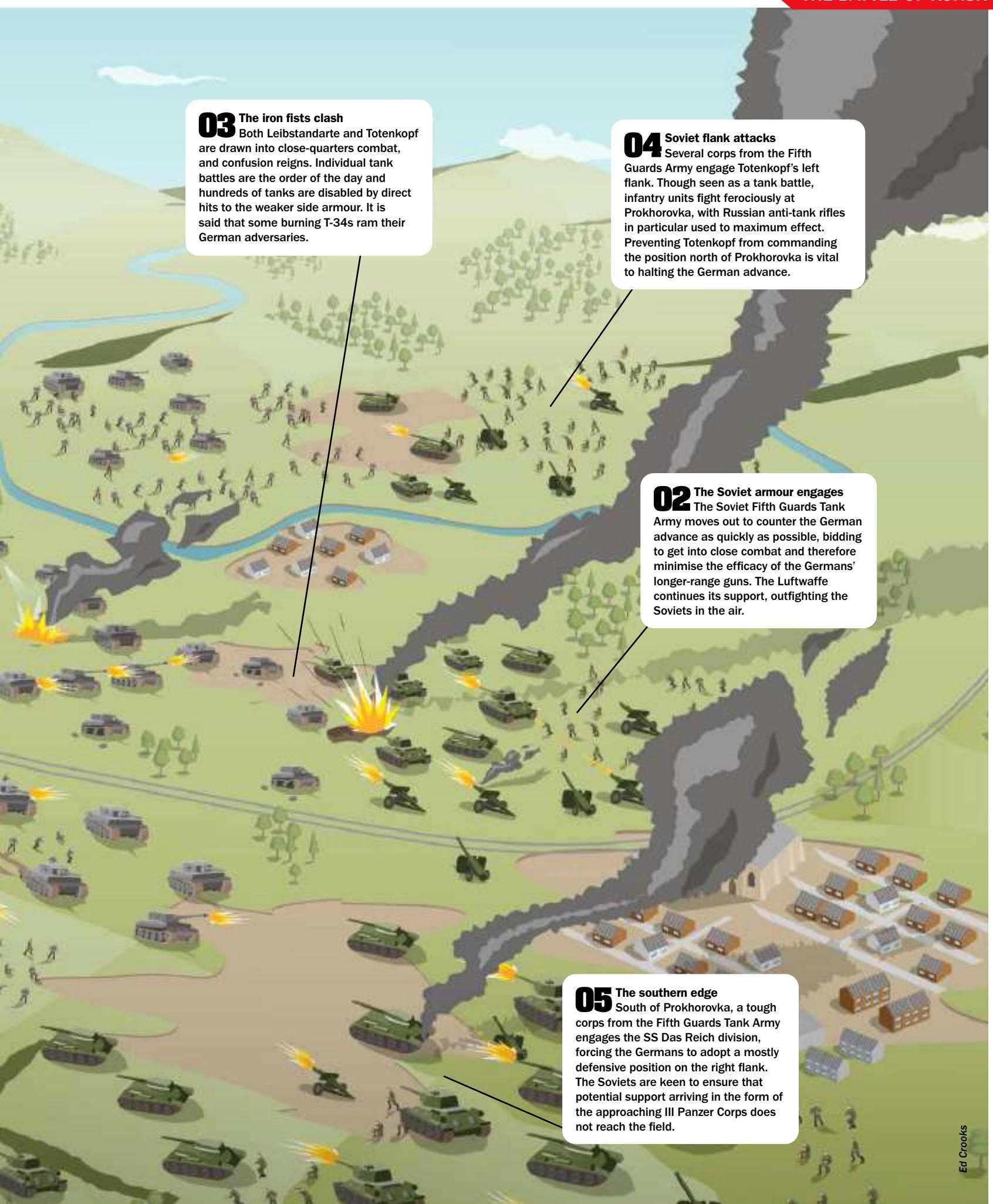
# THE BATTLE OF PROKHOLOVKA

12 JULY 1943

## 01 The SS tank March

SS divisions Leibstandarte and Totenkopf move first in their Panzerkeil wedge formation, with Tigers to the fore and lighter Panzer IIs and IVs moving in behind. The Russians respond with an artillery barrage before moving their own armour into battle.







and Panthers' large turret guns with their superior range. Digging in their T-34s and preparing a wall of defensive fire would serve them better, he argued.

Still, with help from the Luftwaffe, the German armour rammed through the Russian defence and by the end of 6 July, the SS Panzer Corps was wreaking havoc amid the second Soviet defensive line. The following day was cold and the two sides fought in the descending mist, with the Germans pushing steadily on towards the small town of Oboyan, which defended Kursk from the south.

Early in the morning on 7 July, 400 panzers supported by armoured infantry and airpower crashed onto the First Tank Army of the Voronezh Front, which wavered under the onslaught. By 10 July, members of Hoth's XLVIII Panzer Corps seized Hill 244.8, which stood as the most northerly point taken by the Germans in their bid to reach Kursk. SS Panzer Corps, meanwhile, fought a path through the Soviet defensive line and regrouped to direct a major assault against Prokhorovka, which, if successful, looked set to smash Soviet resistance in the south.

Back on the northern face of the salient, Model continued his bid to take the village of Ponyri and fierce hand-to-hand fighting erupted, earning Ponyri the name of 'Stalingrad of the Kursk'. The two sides fought to a bitter standstill. On the night of 10 July, Model committed his last reserves to the fray, and although by 12 July his divisions held most of the village, the Russian defence was too robust and the Ninth Army couldn't effect a full breakthrough. When the Germans received intelligence suggesting a major Soviet offensive was set to launch against

the Orel bulge, Army Group Centre pulled sections of the Ninth Army away from the action and Model's attack halted.

Come the night of 11 July, and although the Germans were eroding the Soviet position in the south, Stalin and his generals couldn't fail to feel confident. Model's position, hemmed in at Ponyri, left them free to move their armoured reserve, the Fifth Guards Tank Army of the Steppe Front, against Hoth's divisions in the salient's southern section.

With Stalin realising that a final battle was set to unfold, the Fifth Guards Tank Army was placed under the command of General Vatutin on the Voronezh Front, a move that led to what is widely regarded as Kursk's defining moment, the mighty tank battle at Prokhorovka.

"All the elements of myth were at hand," Showalter says of this imminent clash of armour. "Prokhorovka offered a head-on, stand-up grapple between the elite troops of the world's best armies on a three-mile front under conditions that left no room for fancy manoeuvres or for air and artillery to make much difference."

The German II SS Panzer Corps, incorporating the panzer grenadier divisions 'Leibstandarte', 'Das Reich' and 'Totenkopf', was pitted against the Fifth Guards Tank Army. These elite troops met as both went on the attack, "an encounter battle in the literal sense, suggesting predators in rut." Other Soviet units also took to the field, including divisions of the Fifth Guards Army, as well as sections of the First Tank Army and Sixth Guards Army.

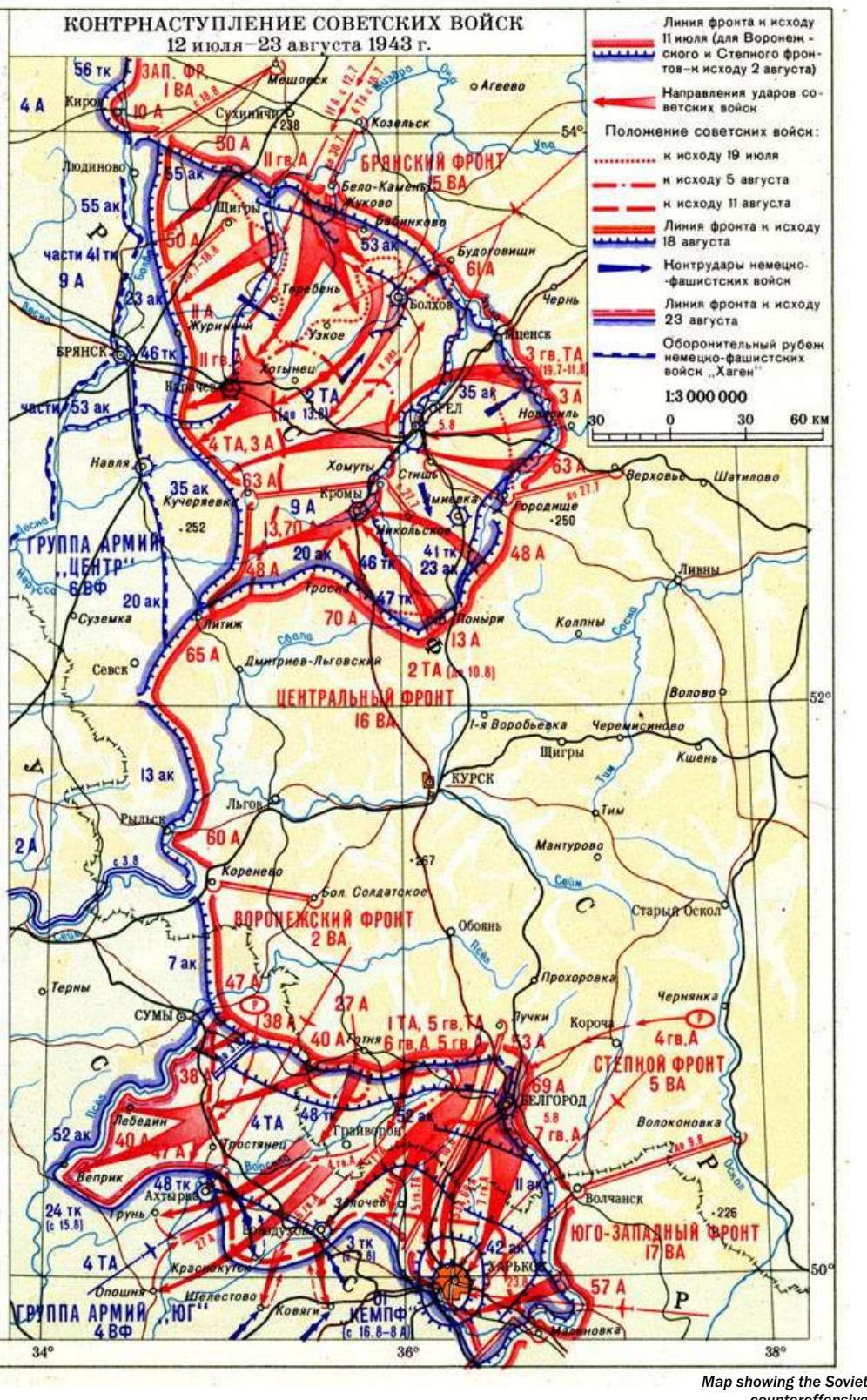
Colonel-General Hoth of the German Fourth Panzer Army, his armour having penetrated the Russian defensive line, was keen to push on before "a defensive scab could form over the thin membrane exposed in the remaining Russian defences," as Clark writes,

At the same time, divisions from the III Panzer Corps, part of Army Detachment Kempf, were moving northward to join II SS Panzer Corps, provoking the Soviets to engage Hoth's forces post-haste. Aware that the German Tigers and Panthers had a longer range than their T-34s, the Soviets bid to move into close combat.

They grossly overestimated the quality of German tanks on this battlefield, according to Kursk historian Lloyd Clark, who claims that the Germans fielded no Panthers or Ferdinands at Prokhorovka, and that II SS Panzer Corps had just 15 Tigers – ten with Totenkopf, four with Leibstandarte and just a solitary giant with Das Reich. Other historians disagree.

Whatever the truth, Leibstandarte, Das Reich and Totenkopf moved in to attack and the great Battle of Prokhorovka began beneath leaden skies, warm and humid, which unleashed rain and peals of thunder as the day wore on. The Germans fielded approximately 600 tanks and assault guns, the Russians 900. Hostilities erupted early on 12 July and the inferno blazed all day. The Luftwaffe flew sorties overhead, and the Germans maintained air superiority throughout the battle, though this counted for little in the end.

SS divisions Leibstandarte and Totenkopf moved first in wedge formation, their Tigers in the



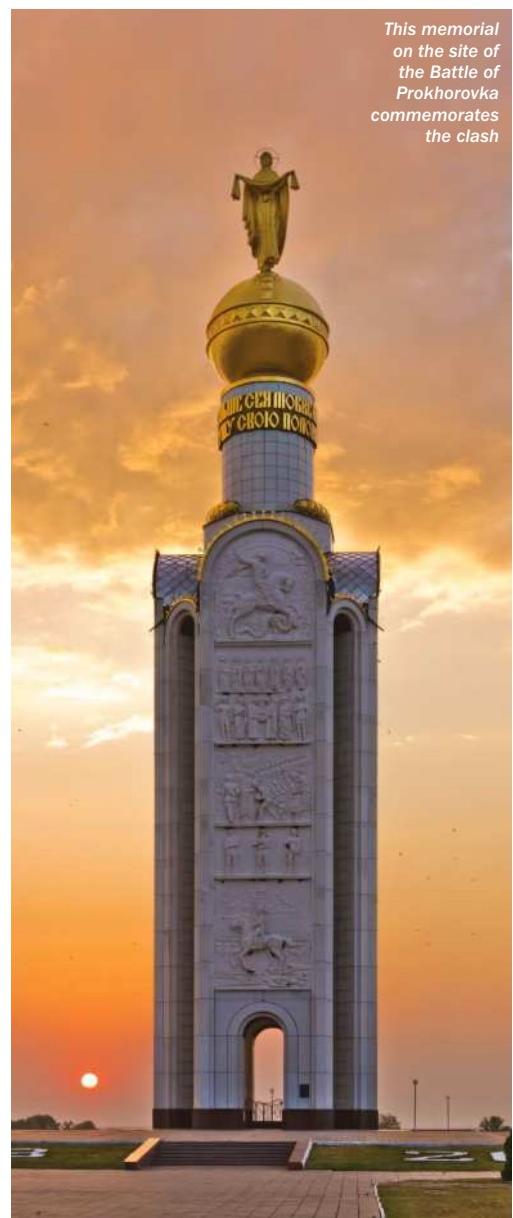
Map showing the Soviet counteroffensive

vanguard, stopping to unload their mighty 88mm shells before moving onward. At about 0830, the Soviet lines unleashed a 15-minute artillery barrage before the Fifth Guards Tank Army rolled towards the tide of panzers, bidding to get into close-quarters combat.

Before long, scores of tanks were churning up the battlefield in individual engagements. Up close, the tanks' thinner side armour was more easily penetrated. Thick smoke from the blazing hulls drifted across the battlefield, making gunnery all the more troublesome. The SS Panzer Corps maintained the pressure throughout the day and the Germans tried desperately to bring III Panzer

Corps from Army Detachment Kempf into play. If these machines could enter the battle, it may well have turned the advantage firmly in the Germans' favour. III Panzer, however, couldn't break through in time and the SS had to fight for Prokhorovka with no further ground support.

Historians talk of a last surge by Leibstandarte and Das Reich aimed at breaking the Soviet lines on the battlefield's western edge, but Fifth Guards Tank Army's Lieutenant-General Rotmistrov engaged his final reserves and the tanks clashed head-on once more, darkening the sky with smoke and dust. The fierce fighting continued well into the night but the Soviets



This memorial  
on the site of  
the Battle of  
Prokhorovka  
commemorates  
the clash

had done their job – they had stopped the German advance.

It is estimated that more than half of the Fifth Guards Tank Army's machines were destroyed. "The Waffen SS won a tactical victory on 12 July," writes Showalter. "Prokhorovka was not a Tiger graveyard but a T-34 junkyard. Operationally, however, the palm rests with the Red Army." Prokhorovka bled the German military machine dry. About 300 panzers lay abandoned on the battlefield, and though some may have been salvaged, the field remained in Soviet hands.

Between 13-15 July, SS Panzer Corps continued to make sorties against the Russian defences but in reality it was all over. Hitler called off Operation Citadel on 13 July as the Russians launched a massive offensive, Operation Kutuzov, aimed at Army Group Centre along the Orel salient. The Battle of Kursk ceded the initiative to the Red Army, which then rolled on towards Berlin. For Hitler and the Wehrmacht, defeat was edging ever closer.

FRANCE, JUNE - AUGUST 1944



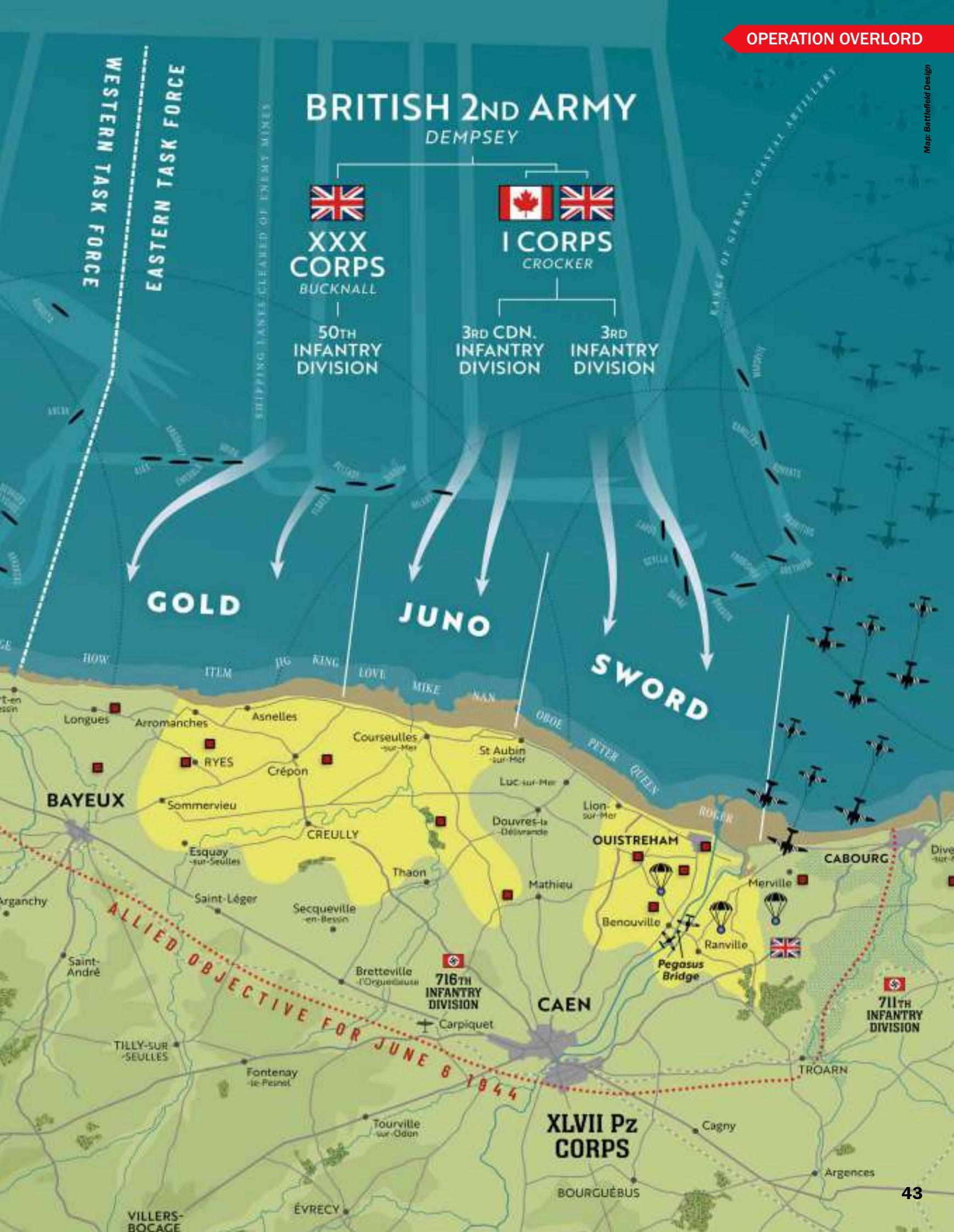
FRANCE, JUNE - AUGUST 1944

# OPERATION OVERLORD

The establishment of the second front in Western Europe hastened  
the end of Nazi Germany and World War II in Europe

WORDS MIKE HASKEW

- Ground captured and held by midnight, June 6 1944
- Areas flooded by German defenders
- German strongpoints
- Allied warships



**A**dolf Hitler boasted that the Atlantic Wall, a string of fortifications stretching from the North Sea to the French frontier with Spain, was impregnable. Nevertheless, Allied commanders knew that the establishment of a second front in Western Europe was a prerequisite to the final defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II.

Since the summer of 1941, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin had clamoured for a second front. His Red Army had borne the brunt of the ground war against the Nazis. However, the United States and Great Britain were not militarily prepared to launch such an endeavour until mid-1944. Dubbed

Operation Overlord, the long-awaited invasion occurred on D-Day, 6 June, along an 80-kilometre stretch of coastline in French Normandy.

When finally unleashed after a weather delay, Operation Overlord involved more than 150,000 troops, nearly 7,000 ships and 4,100 aircraft. In the early morning, Allied soldiers stormed ashore on five invasion beaches. From east to west, the British Third Division assaulted Sword Beach, the 50th Division Gold Beach, the Canadian Third Division Juno Beach, and elements of the American First and 29th Divisions Omaha and the Fourth Division Utah beaches respectively.

American General Dwight D Eisenhower led the senior Allied command structure, while his

immediate subordinates were British. Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder was deputy supreme commander; Admiral Bertram Ramsay led the seaborne effort; Air Chief Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory the air; and General Bernard Law Montgomery the ground forces. American General Omar N Bradley commanded the US First Army under Montgomery, and General Miles Dempsey led the British Second Army.

The Allies knew that Operation Overlord was fraught with risk. The assault troops had to force a lodgment on the Norman coast and not only defend against certain German counterattacks from elements of Army Group B under the resourceful Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, but also



somehow rapidly expand the beachhead inland. The naval forces would be subject to attack from enemy submarines and air assets in the relative confinement of the English Channel.

Still, the riskiest proposition of Overlord was the predawn insertion of three airborne divisions, parachuting or gliding into the countryside to secure the flanks of the landings, holding vital bridges and causeway exits, disrupting communications, and standing fast until relieved with a linkup of advancing troops off the beaches. The American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions came down widely dispersed in the west, while the British Sixth Airborne's glider landings occurred on the eastern flank. Casualties were expected to

run high, but Eisenhower deemed the operation worthwhile. In the end, the airborne forces performed with great distinction.

At about 11.30pm on 5 June, the invasion armada set sail for Normandy. Soon after, transport aircraft took to the sky carrying the airborne contingent. It was hoped that naval bombardment and frequent air raids against German defensive positions and infrastructure had paved the way for a successful landing and a push inland that would secure vital objectives and close gaps between the beaches swiftly.

At first light, Allied troops stormed ashore in Normandy. On Sword Beach, the British fought their way inland to capture the German defensive

position at La Breche and reached the outskirts of Ouistreham. At Gold, the British seized Port-en-Bessin, six kilometres inland. Heavy seas hampered the landing of reinforcements and the movement of supporting tanks, and though their beachhead was secure, the British failed to take the transport and communications centre of Caen, a primary D-Day objective.

At Juno, the Canadians faced intense opposition and fought for two hours to dislodge defenders along the shoreline. Eventually, the Canadians linked up with the British from Gold Beach, but a gap still remained between Gold and Sword. The Allies were actually aided by the ineptitude of the German response. The bulk of

## BOYS OF POINTE DU HOC

US Army Rangers scaled cliffs on D-Day to attack German gun emplacements that threatened the invasion beaches

Among the daring exploits of D-Day, a detachment of 225 US Army Rangers of the Second Battalion scaled the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc, west of Omaha Beach. Their objective was a German battery believed to house six 155mm howitzers capable of delivering devastating fire against either Omaha or Utah Beach.

Led by Lieutenant Colonel James Rudder, the Rangers were to silence the guns after climbing the promontory while under enemy fire. On paper, it looked like a suicide run. But the Rangers were equal to the task. They planned to use grappling hooks on ropes fired toward the summit and then work their

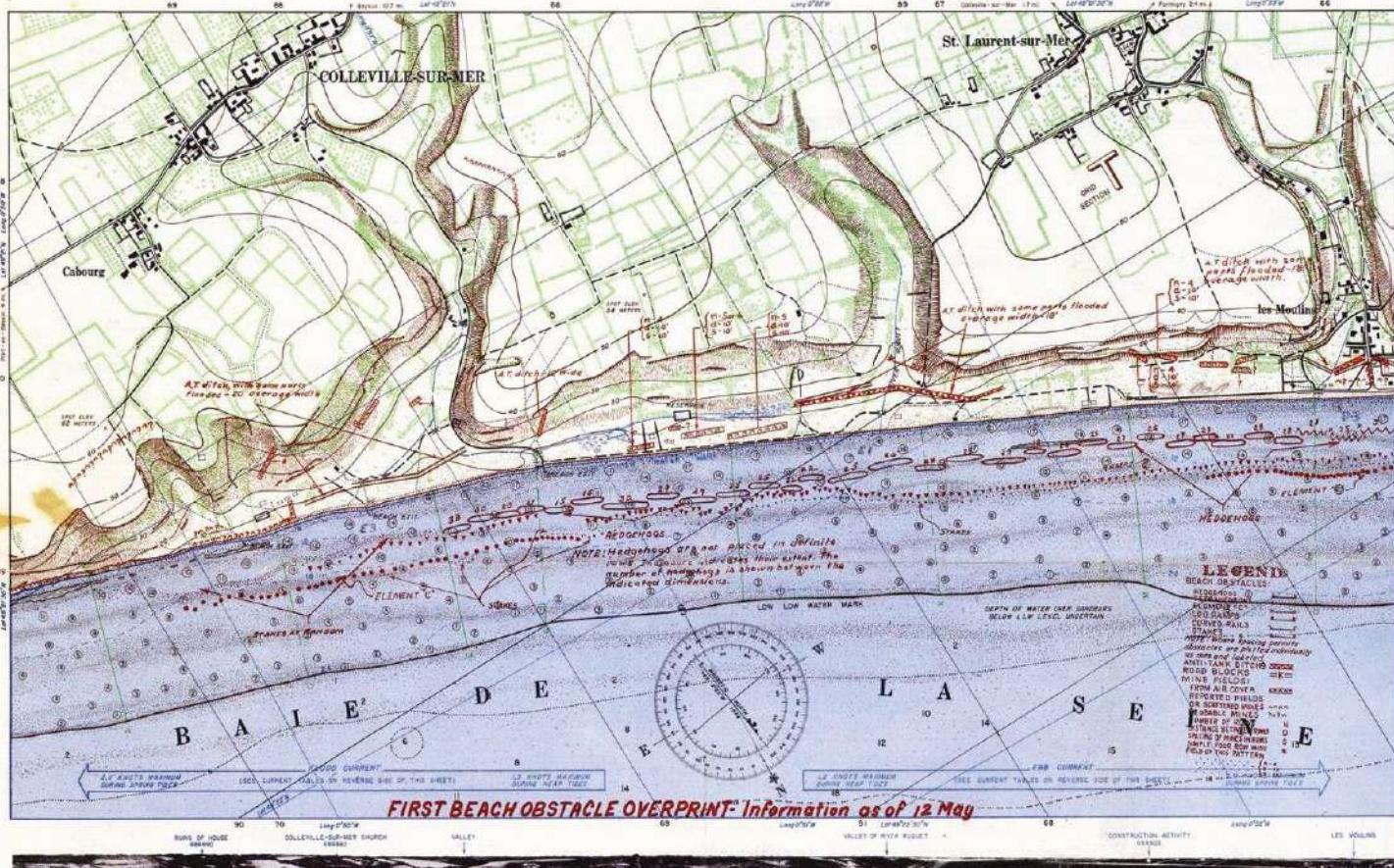
way hand over hand to the top. They also borrowed ladders from the London Fire Brigade for the task.

Once in position, the Rangers found that most of their ropes were soaked. With the added weight the catapults failed to reach the desired height. Undeterred, the Rangers won the crest and drove the Germans off only to discover that the guns had been removed. Five of them were later located in an apple orchard and destroyed with thermite grenades.

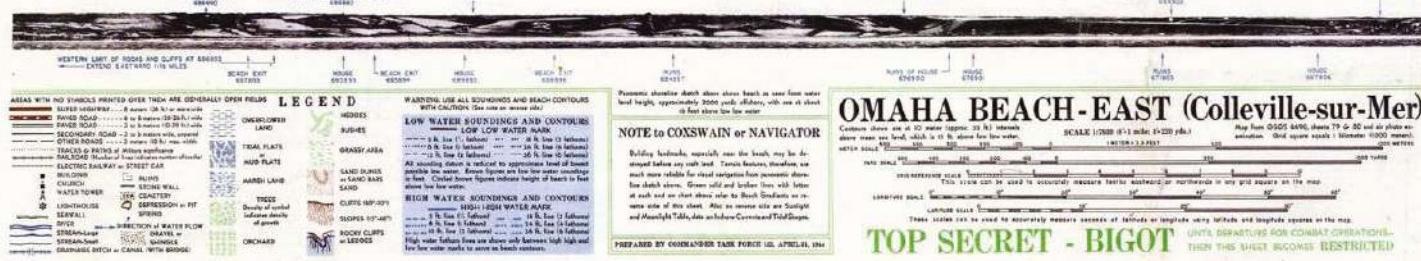
The Rangers stood their ground, fighting off several counterattacks until relieved on 8 June. Of those engaged, only 90 remained unscathed.



*After the capture of Pointe du Hoc, German prisoners march into captivity near the command post of Lieutenant Colonel James Rudder*



Magite Historic/Alamy Stock Photo



their armoured divisions were held in reserve to be released only on Hitler's personal order. Therefore, the German 21st Panzer Division mounted the only substantial counterattack of the day, driving between Sword and Gold beaches all the way to the coast. However, there were no reinforcements to exploit the gain and the Germans were compelled to withdraw.

The American landings at Utah Beach went fortuitously awry. The Fourth Division actually came ashore in the wrong place, but assistant division commander General Theodore Roosevelt Jr proclaimed, "We'll start the war from here!" Within just a few hours, the Americans were plunging ahead against unexpectedly light resistance.

Though many of the enemy troops that garrisoned the Atlantic Wall defences were static units or conscripts from occupied countries, the 352nd Infantry Division was an experienced formation that took full advantage of the cliffs at Omaha Beach and made the broad expanse of the shoreline at low tide a killing ground.

Omaha was the most horrific battle of D-Day. Many US soldiers of the first wave were shot as soon as the ramps of their landing craft were lowered. Others were weighed down by combat packs and drowned. Rough seas swamped

amphibious tanks meant to add firepower to the assault. The situation was in such doubt at mid-morning that General Bradley contemplated withdrawing the troops from the beach and diverting reinforcements to quieter sectors.

Then, the resilience of the GIs prevailed as junior and noncommissioned officers got up from the makeshift shelter of beach obstacles to take on German strongpoints one by one. Finally, in the afternoon the situation at Omaha stabilised. But the beachhead was precarious and a 14-kilometre gap existed between the Americans at Omaha and the Canadians at Juno. The distance was even greater to a link-up with the Fourth Division at Utah.

Despite the difficulties encountered on D-Day at the cost of 2,500 dead and another 7,500 wounded, the Allied forces solidified their foothold in Normandy. Looking beyond the beaches, though, weeks of tough fighting lay ahead. Operation Overlord, the Normandy campaign, proceeded – painfully at times.

Montgomery hammered away at Caen, but the Germans held the city and the dominating high ground of Hill 112 for more than a month. Still, the British commander contended that his design was to draw the bulk of the German armoured divisions,

finally released by Hitler, upon himself to enable the Americans on his right flank to advance.

The Americans were challenged by the terrain as centuries-old hedgerows made a patchwork of the Norman countryside, turning meadows into free-fire zones and country lanes into deathtraps. Progress was slow as some formations turned toward the Cotentin Peninsula and the deepwater port of Cherbourg while others maintained the advance against the town of Saint Lo and other objectives that would unhinge the German resistance.

While the British finally secured Caen in mid-July, the Americans launched an all-out effort to break free of the hedgerows. Bradley's plan, called Operation Cobra, involved the saturation bombing of German positions along the front lines followed by a swift assault of American armour and infantry that would lead the spearheads into open country.

On 25 July, Cobra was unleashed. The defending Germans were stunned, and one division – the Panzer Lehr – ceased to function due to the ferocity of the bombing. During the next 48 hours, American forces advanced 27 kilometres. Simultaneously, renewed British efforts combined to unhinge the German defences in Normandy. A foolhardy counterattack ordered by Hitler served only to further weaken

the German forces, depleting their armoured contingent significantly.

With the enemy in full retreat a golden opportunity to bag the entire German Seventh Army and other formations presented itself. A giant Allied pincer movement converged on the area of Falaise. By mid-August Allied forces had thrown a bridgehead across the River Seine while Montgomery fixed the bulk of the German armour to the north and the Canadian First Army swung toward the enemy right flank. Meanwhile, the newly activated Third Army under fiery General George S Patton Jr dashed across France, threatening to outflank the Germans in the south.

Although fanatical German resistance held the shoulders of the 'Falaise Pocket' open and allowed about 40,000 enemy soldiers to escape, Allied air and artillery turned the area into a meatgrinder. More than 10,000 Germans were killed and 50,000 captured. Eisenhower visited the battleground and remarked that he could not step in any direction without touching the body of a dead enemy soldier.

By late August, the Allies had destroyed organised German resistance in Normandy, vaulted the Seine, secured the Cotentin Peninsula, and raced across Brittany deep into the interior of France. On 25 August, Paris, the City of Light, was liberated after four arduous years of German occupation. Operation Overlord and the Normandy campaign were over. The Allies sustained over 200,000 casualties, more than 125,000 of them American, while the Germans lost well over 200,000 soldiers who were either killed, wounded, or captured.

More grievous losses were sustained during months of fighting, but in April 1945 American soldiers linked up with the Soviet Red Army, advancing west, at the German town of Torgau on the Elbe River. Within days, the Third Reich was no more.



American soldiers crouch behind the gunwales of a landing craft as they approach Omaha Beach on D-Day



American troops accompany M4 Sherman medium tanks through the ravaged French village of Coutances during Operation Cobra

## A COMMUNIQUÉ NEVER SENT

Although he had faith in the success of Operation Overlord, General Dwight Eisenhower was required to prepare for the worst

The weather was horrific but thousands of soldiers were poised to assault Hitler's Fortress Europe. While rain pelted and wind howled, General Dwight D Eisenhower assembled senior commanders at Southwick House in Portsmouth, England, early on 5 June 1944 to seek advice. Weather forecasts indicated a window for the D-Day operation, already postponed by 24 hours, to launch the next day.

Security concerns were rising. Such an immense operation could not remain secret indefinitely. The troops were ready. Another postponement would sap combat efficiency. The next favourable conditions were two weeks away. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery

piped, "I would say go!" Others nodded, and Eisenhower pronounced, "OK, we'll go!"

Failure was unthinkable, but Eisenhower prepared a statement shouldering command responsibility: "Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that Bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone." Ultimately, the decision to order Overlord was Eisenhower's. The message stayed in his pocket and was given to a staff officer as a souvenir.



General Dwight D Eisenhower, supreme Allied commander, poses with senior Allied officers during planning for Operation Overlord

THE NETHERLANDS, SEPTEMBER 1944

# OPERATION MARKET GARDEN

For over 75 years the underlying reasons for the failure at Arnhem have gone largely unremarked upon, despite being in plain sight

WORDS WILLIAM F BUCKINGHAM



**T**he Battle of Normandy effectively ended on 21 August 1944 with the closing of the Falaise Gap, 76 days after Allied troops first set foot on the D-Day landing beaches. The battle cost the Germans around 10,000 dead and 50,000 prisoners along with almost all their heavy equipment and vehicles, and an estimated tide of 20,000 survivors fled eastward as far as southern Holland, where the local civilians dubbed Tuesday 5 September 'Dolle Dinsdag' or 'Mad Tuesday'.

The Allied pursuit began on 28 August with British tanks reaching Arras on 1 September, Brussels was liberated two days later and by 6 September, the advance was approaching the Dutch border in the face of stiffening German

resistance. In an effort to maintain the momentum Allied Supreme Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower authorised Operation Market Garden, which was intended to bypass the Westwall fixed defences guarding the German frontier and open a route into the North German Plain and thus the heart of the Third Reich.

Operation Market was the largest airborne operation in history and involved landing 40,000 men from three Allied Airborne Divisions along a 60-mile corridor running north from the Belgian border to the Dutch city of Arnhem on the Lower Rhine, tasked to seize and hold 17 bridges across eight separate waterways starting at the Wilhelmina Canal just north of Eindhoven. The operation began on 17 September 1944 with the

US 101st Airborne Division assigned to secure the southern third of the corridor, the centre portion including the city of Nijmegen was the responsibility of the US 82nd Airborne Division and the furthest third was allotted to the British 1st Airborne Division.

The ground component of the Operation, codenamed Garden, tasked British 30 Corps – spearheaded by the Guards Armoured Division – to break through the coalescing German defence on the Belgian border and advance rapidly up the Airborne Corridor, relieving each crossing in turn. All this was scheduled to take 48 hours. In the event the two US Airborne divisions secured all their allotted objectives, although the first bridge across the Wilhelmina Canal was destroyed, prompting a 36-hour delay compounded by the tardy performance of 30 Corps, while the road and rail bridges across the River Waal at Nijmegen were not secured until the evening of 20 September, 24 hours behind schedule.

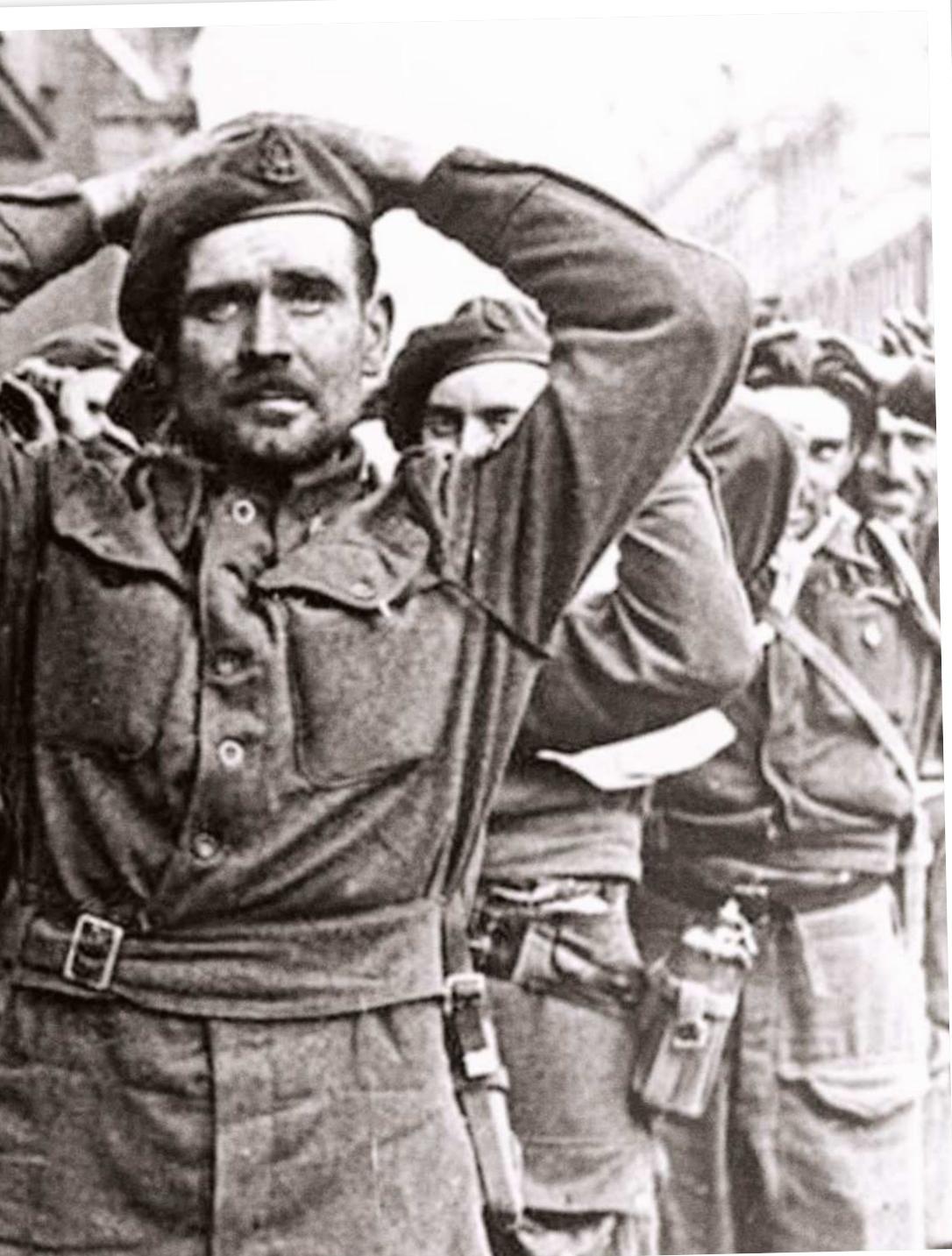
Matters went most awry at Arnhem however, despite a near-flawless delivery. The 1st Airborne Division's plan was to despatch the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron and the 1st Parachute Brigade to secure the objectives in Arnhem. The bulk of the first lift would remain at the landing area until the second lift arrived the following day, after which the entire division would also move into Arnhem.

In the event only a small part of the 1st Parachute Brigade managed to slip through to the north end of the Arnhem road bridge, where they held the objective for 80 rather than 48 hours before being overwhelmed after an epic siege. The remainder of the 1st Parachute Brigade fought itself to destruction trying to reach the bridge before being driven back to the main body of the 1st Airborne Division, which was blocked and surrounded at Oosterbeek, midway between the landing area and Arnhem.

After another epic six-day siege that reduced Oosterbeek to rubble and the failure of three attempts to push reinforcements across the Lower Rhine, around 2,500 survivors were evacuated in small boats on the night of 25-26 September 1944. The evacuation effectively marked the end of Operation Market Garden.

The search for reasons for the 1st Airborne Division's failure at Arnhem began as soon as Market Garden ended, and several recurring favourites have emerged over the years. These include: landing the division in daylight, spreading the division landing across three lifts on successive days, and the seven mile or so distance between the landing area and Arnhem. All of these were mandated by external factors however, and they did not impact adversely on events at Arnhem.

First, because Market was launched in a no-moon period, a daylight insertion was unavoidable because paratroopers and glider pilots alike required a degree of natural light to judge depth and distance for landing. It should



also be noted that the Market first lift was widely hailed as the most successful to date by experienced commanders from all three Airborne Divisions.

Second, the 1st Airborne was not alone in being delivered in multiple lifts spread over several days simply because there were insufficient transport aircraft available to deliver three complete Airborne divisions simultaneously. The shortening autumn days ruled out flying more than one lift per day because it would involve taking off or returning in darkness, and while RAF aircrew were trained in night flying and navigation techniques, their USAAF counterparts largely were not and also lacked trained navigators and ground crew.

Third, the landing area was selected because it was the closest site to Arnhem suitable for large-scale glider landings, as contemporary maps show. While the area at the south end of the Arnhem road bridge could have been used as a parachute landing zone, the planners considered it too soft and riven with deep, wide drainage ditches for safe use by heavily laden gliders. Furthermore, the distance between the landing area and the objectives in Arnhem was not the handicap it is often painted. The 2nd Parachute Battalion reached the Arnhem road bridge in just over four hours, fighting several small actions en route and while shepherding a number of personnel and vehicles from the Brigade column and a variety of support units. This shows covering the seven miles was perfectly feasible providing the attackers moved with sufficient speed and application.

Enemy action is another often repeated reason for the failure, usually relying on two specific

examples. SS Bataillon Krafft, an approximately 400-strong replacement training unit billeted near Oosterbeek, is routinely credited with single-handedly holding back the 1st Parachute Brigade's advance to Arnhem until after dark on 17 September, largely due to a highly embellished and self-serving report by its commander, Hauptsturmführer Sepp Krafft.

The reality was rather more prosaic. Krafft serendipitously deployed his unit along the eastern side of what was to be the 1st Airborne Division's main landing area to avoid Allied preparatory bombing, but its impact was far less than popularly claimed, amounting to a handful of relatively minor clashes. One element was wiped out by the 2nd Parachute Battalion after straying onto the landing area, another spent several hours inconclusively skirmishing with a British unit defending the landing area and a third caught two of the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron's Jeeps as they belatedly began their move from the landing area to the Arnhem bridge.

The most significant clashes were with the 3rd Parachute Battalion on the outskirts of Oosterbeek, consisting of a brief hit-and-run ambush in the late afternoon followed by an inconclusive two-hour fight with the tail end of the 3rd Battalion column at dusk that ended when the SS element withdrew. None of this materially impacted the 1st Parachute Brigade's advance toward Arnhem however, and any connected consequences were attributable to other factors.

The second popular myth with reference to enemy action is the recurring idea that the 1st Airborne Division landed atop two fully functioning panzer divisions. While II SS Panzerkorps,

consisting of 9 and 10 SS Panzer Divisions, had been in the vicinity of Arnhem since 8 September, the fighting in Normandy and the retreat across northern France and Belgium had reduced them to a fraction of a single division in total, with a relative handful of vehicles and heavy equipment, the bulk of which were despatched south to Belgium to block the Allied ground advance on 13 September, four days before Market commenced.

By 17 September, 10 SS Panzer Division had been ordered to refit in place in Holland at three locations up to 30 miles east and north of Arnhem, while 9 SS Panzer Division had been ordered to hand over its surviving heavy equipment to its running mate and the bulk of its personnel had already been despatched to Germany by rail to be re-equipped by the time Market began. The remainder, mainly service and supply personnel denuded of almost all heavy equipment and motor transport, were scattered across locations north and east of Arnhem between 16 and 35 miles from the landing area.

It is therefore clear that neither of II SS Panzerkorps' badly depleted formations were close to being under the 1st Airborne Division's landing and more importantly, none of 9 SS Panzer Division's elements were located between the landing area and Arnhem. They were therefore unable to seriously interfere with the 1st Parachute Brigade's advance into Arnhem in the first vital ten to 12 hours following the landing, when the British formation's battle for its objectives was won and lost.

Apart from the riverside loophole that permitted the 2nd Parachute Battalion to slip through to the Arnhem road bridge, German reactions and



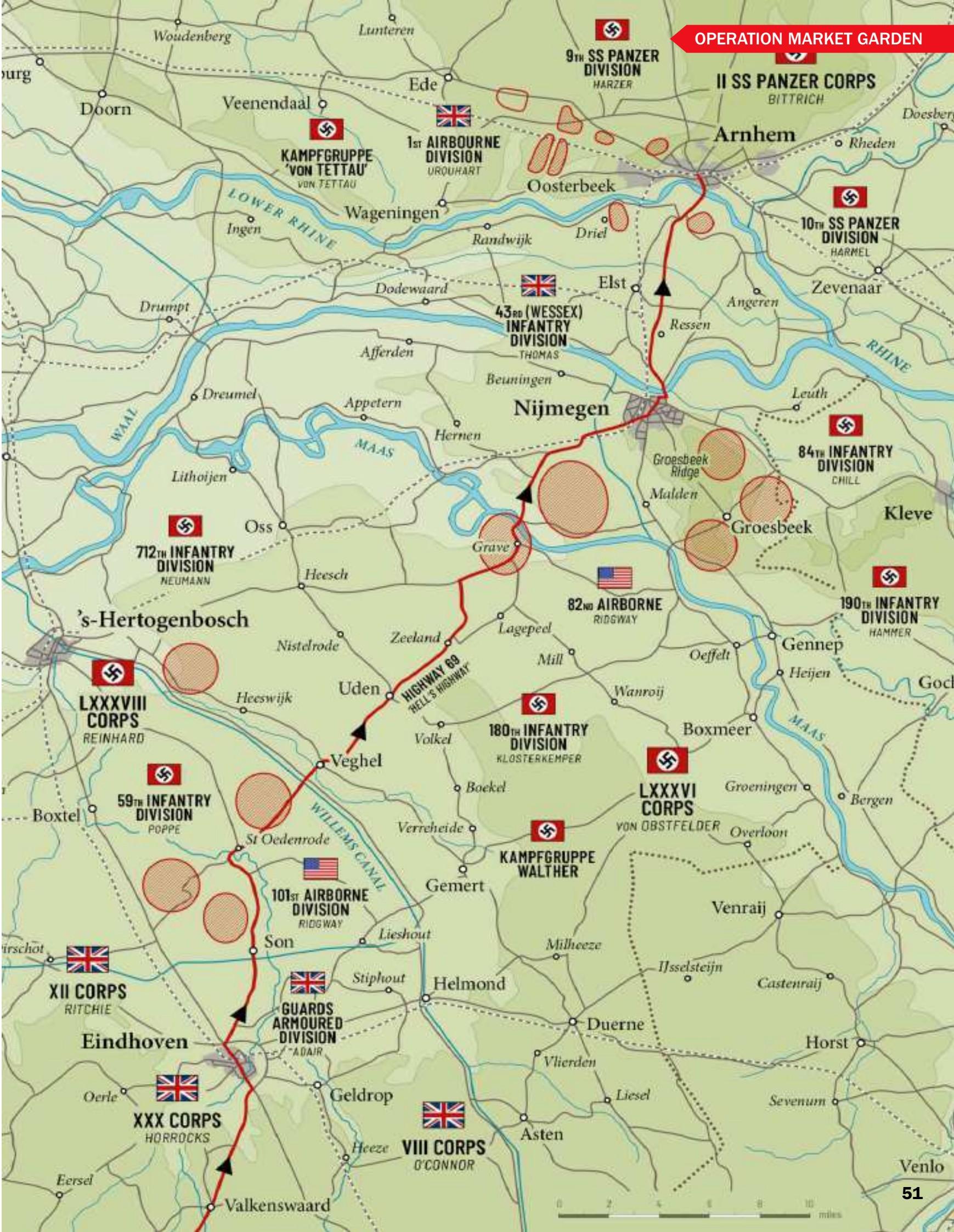
*At the time, Market was the largest airborne operation in history*



*An Allied paratrooper makes an uncomfortable landing*



## **OPERATION MARKET GARDEN**



deployments were exemplary, however. II SS Panzerkorps HQ issued warning orders less than an hour after receiving reports of the landing, 9 SS Panzer Division's denuded units were on the way to the scene of the action within three hours and within four hours Feldmarschall Walther Model had issued orders that framed the subsequent successful German conduct of the battle.

All this suggests that the reasons for the 1st Airborne Division's failure at Arnhem were a little closer to home, and at first glance the problems appears to be with the division's attitude as a whole. Although the glider and parachute operations carried out by two of its constituent brigades in Sicily were effectively fiascos, the 1st Airborne Division returned from the Mediterranean

in November 1943 with an overwhelming sense of its experience and capabilities; tendencies noted not least by the division's new commander Major-General Robert Urquhart, who observed a reluctance to accept the necessity of any additional training.

Similarly, Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Henniker from the division's Royal Engineer contingent referred to many surrounding themselves with a mystique that was not entirely justified by experience while Major Philip Tower RA, who joined the division after its return to the UK, recognised the quality of his new Airborne comrades but felt they overestimated their abilities, and noted an unwillingness to acknowledge that any worthwhile experience was to be had outside the Airborne fold. This is

illustrated by an incident when umpires ruled against a particularly poorly co-ordinated attack by a 1st Airborne Division unit during Exercise Mush in April 1944, after which a company commander protested loudly that "you can't do this to us, we are the original Red Devils!"

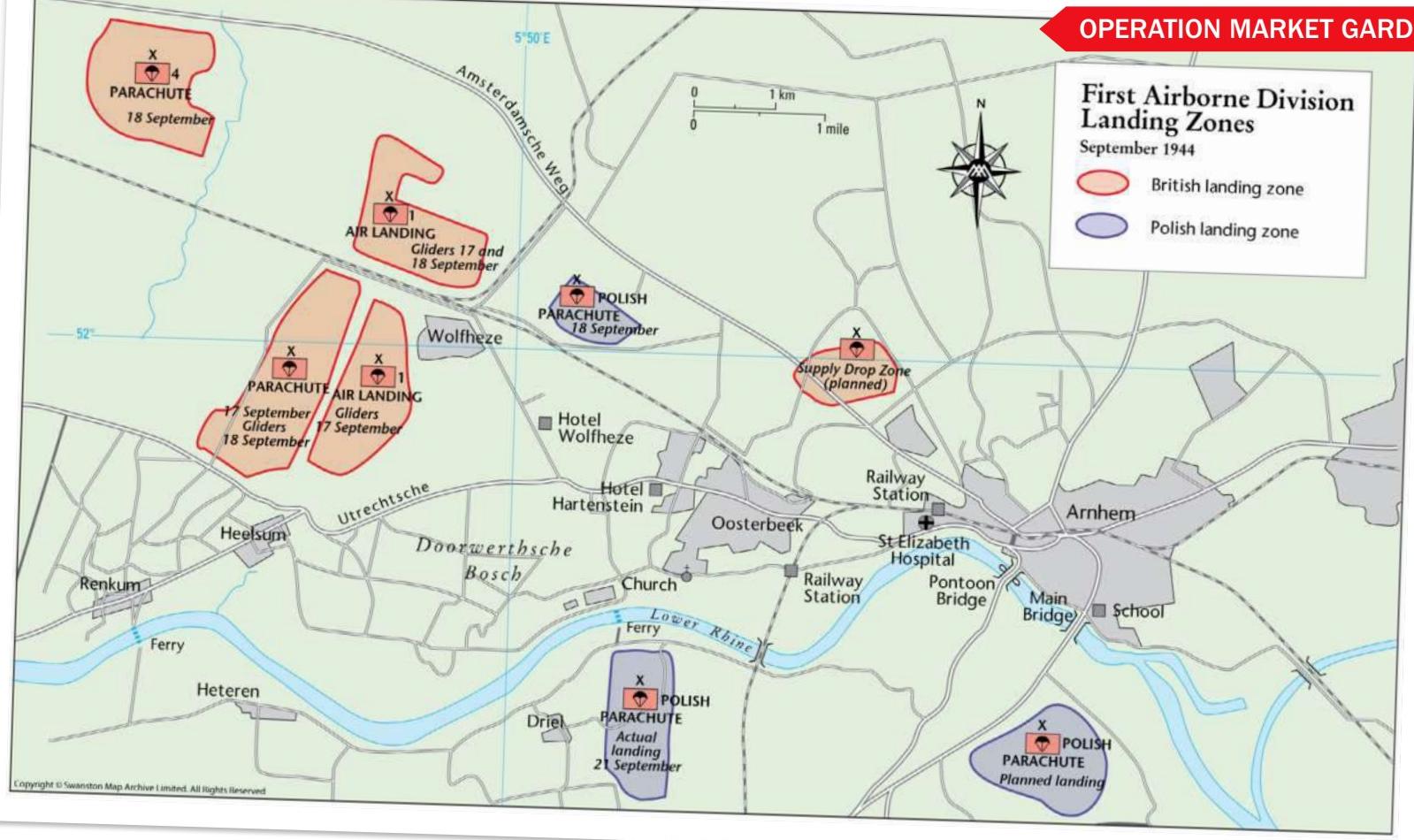
The attitude manifested itself as indiscipline in the lower ranks, particularly within the 1st Parachute Brigade. Lieutenant-Colonel John Frost, who commanded the 2nd Parachute Battalion at Arnhem bridge, referred to low level disciplinary problems across the whole brigade from 'hard cases' disinclined to obey regulations, along with widespread absenteeism which interfered with training and disrupted unit cohesion, while the commander of the 3rd Parachute Battalion was relieved after his Battalion was unable to march on a test exercise.

The epicentre of indiscipline was the 1st Parachute Battalion where one commander was posted away after tightening discipline with the aid of a Guards RSM, which the troops considered to



Dutch citizens welcome a British Sherman tank on 21 September





© Map Archive

be "treating battle hardened men like children" and his replacement was not popular, either. The feeling was mutual. Lieutenant-Colonel Kenneth Darling later recalled, "Frankly, I was horrified by 1 Para, they thought they knew all the answers, which they did not, and their discipline was not what I expected." The upshot was a mutiny on 30 March 1944 when the Battalion refused to draw parachutes for a jump which led to Darling being replaced by Lieutenant-Colonel David Dobie, who led the 1st Battalion into Arnhem. In some instances the indiscipline spilled over into outright criminality. For example, on 12 February 1944 the local fire brigade had to be summoned after a

smoke marker was ignited outside the Battalion Orderly Room, and just over a month later the safe in the Battalion's NAAFI canteen was broken into and the funds stolen.

The obvious conclusion to draw from all this was that unwarranted arrogance and poor discipline were the reasons for the 1st Airborne Division's failure. However, events in Holland clearly show this was not the case. With regard to the 1st Parachute Brigade, the 2nd Parachute Battalion reached the Arnhem road bridge in just over four hours accompanied by the brigade column and other elements totalling approximately 740 men.

This force held the north end of the bridge for three and a half days, losing 81 dead and approximately 280 wounded in the process, almost 50 per cent of the force. They were only overwhelmed after running out of ammunition and food, and being literally blasted out of mostly burning buildings by artillery and tanks.

The 1st Parachute Battalion spent 11 hours trying to reach its objective north of Arnhem, losing 11 dead and over a hundred wounded, before moving immediately to reinforce Frost at the road bridge. It then joined the 3rd Parachute Battalion in repeated unsuccessful attempts to break through



the German blocking line in the western outskirts of Arnhem, during which both units fought themselves virtually to destruction. By midday on Tuesday 19 September, the 1st Parachute Battalion had been reduced to around 200 men from the 548 who had jumped in two days earlier, while the 588-strong 3rd Parachute Battalion had been reduced to just 60.

Neither was this level of raw courage and application unique to the 1st Parachute Brigade, as the fight in the outskirts of Arnhem took a similar toll of battalions from the 1st Airlanding Brigade and 4th Parachute Brigade and was then replicated across the entire gamut of the 1st Airborne Division's units in the subsequent six-day siege of Oosterbeek. This all strongly suggests that the 1st Parachute Brigade's indiscipline was largely a case of good field soldiers making poor garrison soldiers, and that there was little wrong with the 1st Airborne Division up to the battalion level or equivalent, arrogance notwithstanding.

In fact, the root of the 1st Airborne Division's failure was higher up the chain of command, and at the very top. A Regular officer commissioned in 1920, Major-General Robert Elliot Urquhart assumed command of the 1st Airborne Division on 10 January 1944, having risen from the rank of major to major-general in the course of war service in a variety of staff positions, including a 13-month stint on the staff of the 51st Highland Division in North Africa. This was followed by his sole operational command appointment, four months commanding 231 Infantry Brigade in Sicily and

southern Italy; he never commanded or served with an airborne unit prior to assuming command of the 1st Airborne Division.

His relatively rapid progress and elevation to the latter command over better-qualified candidates was due to the intervention of Field-Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery. Urquhart had been a Montgomery protégé since coming to the latter's notice when serving on the 3rd Infantry Division staff in October 1940, and he was given command of the 1st Airborne Division after Montgomery raised the idea with the commander of British 1st Airborne Corps, Major-General Frederick Browning. To be fair, there is no evidence Urquhart sought the appointment and he created a good impression at his new command, but circumstances conspired to prevent him properly grasping the operational implications, restrictions and realities of his new role.

In the five months before D-Day, Urquhart attended numerous conferences and planning meetings in or near London over a hundred miles from his HQ in Lincolnshire, and after the invasion, he was fully involved in preparing for a total of 15 cancelled operations. This was a punishing schedule and was likely a cause of the severe bout of malaria that hospitalised him for almost a month in April 1944. Urquhart's lack of airborne experience was clearly apparent in his planning for Arnhem, which elicited disbelief among senior US Airborne commanders. For example, Brigadier-General James Gavin, commanding the 82nd Airborne Division and the most experienced of

all Allied airborne commanders, later likened Urquhart's scheme to a peacetime exercise.

Urquhart gave assembling his division in its entirety as much attention as accomplishing its mission, and his assumption that the Germans would permit it to sit in place for 24 hours before moving into Arnhem was fanciful, as the fact that the bulk of the 1st Airborne Division covered less than half the distance to Arnhem before being blocked and surrounded shows. Urquhart's thinking appears to have been rooted in conventional ground operation rather than what was required for an airborne insertion 60 miles behind enemy lines, and thus suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the realities of airborne operations.

Urquhart compounded his unrealistic planning with a series of poor decisions after Market was launched, to the extent it can be argued he did not make a single correct decision in his first two days on the ground in Holland. He failed to clarify the division command succession until boarding the glider for Arnhem, a basic precaution and a vital one in airborne operations, given the routine risks inherent in aerial delivery even without enemy action. In the event his chief of staff was obliged to mitigate the consequences with diplomacy in the midst of the battle when Urquhart abruptly left his HQ shortly after landing in response to an erroneous rumour that the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron had failed to arrive in Holland.

Instead of checking the veracity of the rumour, Urquhart summoned the Squadron Commander, Major Freddie Gough, to Division HQ by radio before racing off in a Jeep to inform Brigadier Lathbury and the 1st Parachute Brigade in person. The knee-jerk summons separated Gough from his command for the remainder of the battle and effectively ended the squadron's coup-de-main mission.

More seriously, it can be argued that at this point Urquhart effectively abdicated command of the 1st Airborne Division as he disappeared with no explanation or contact arrangements and then deliberately severed radio contact with his HQ, which was never re-established. His arrival at the 3rd Parachute Battalion at dusk was instrumental in that unit abandoning its move to Arnhem and halting in Oosterbeek for the night. Urquhart then chose to remain with the 3rd Battalion, still out of contact with his HQ and the rest of the division, and thus unable to exert any influence on the developing battle, until the late afternoon of 18 September. He then made an ill-advised attempt to regain his HQ accompanied by Brigadier Gerald Lathbury that ended with Lathbury being badly wounded and captured and Urquhart trapped in an attic for 12 hours, before finally regaining his HQ at 7:25am on 19 September, after a 40-hour absence. By that time, the initial window of opportunity had gone and the Arnhem portion of Operation Market had effectively failed.

## "URQUHART'S LACK OF AIRBORNE EXPERIENCE WAS CLEARLY APPARENT IN HIS PLANNING FOR ARNHEM, WHICH ELICITED DISBELIEF AMONG SENIOR US AIRBORNE COMMANDERS"





American troops attempt to free trapped GIs from the wreckage of a crash-landed Waco glider

That is not to say that Urquhart was a bad or incompetent commander. He did a more than adequate job of rallying his division and establishing a defensible perimeter at Oosterbeek while in contact with the enemy, and then orchestrated the defence of that perimeter under ever increasing German pressure. When it became clear this was unsustainable and permission was granted to withdraw across the river, Urquhart planned and implemented an evacuation inspired by the retreat from Gallipoli during the First World War codenamed Operation Berlin, which succeeded in lifting over 2,000 men across the Lower Rhine on the night of 25-26 September. All that came after the airborne assault at Arnhem had morphed into a conventional defensive infantry battle however, and the evidence strongly suggests that Urquhart did not fully grasp the realities of airborne operations.

That lack of understanding contributed significantly to the failure of the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem and, by extension, to the failure of Operation Market Garden.

The Arnhem portion of Market Garden might still have succeeded in spite of Urquhart's errors had the 1st Parachute Brigade managed to seize and hold the objectives in the city. This was not to be however, as the Brigade commander was only marginally more experienced himself. Brigadier Gerald Lathbury was commissioned in 1926 and his war service consisted of a number of separate staff appointments at the War Office, interspersed with eight months overseeing the raising of the 3rd Parachute Battalion and four months performing the same role with the 3rd Parachute Brigade.

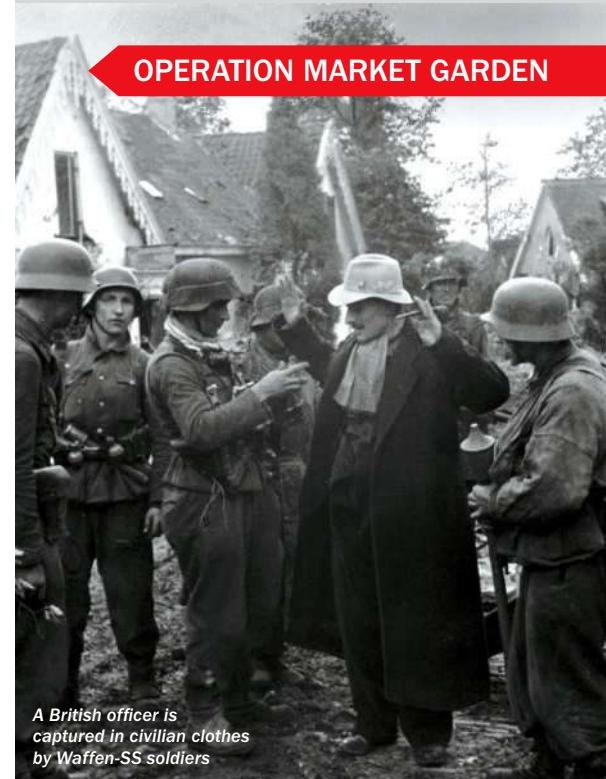
He assumed command of the 1st Parachute Brigade on 25 April 1943 and led its operation to seize the Primasole Bridge in Sicily three months later. The operation was a fiasco as the Brigade was scattered up to 20 miles from its objective, the ground force took 48 rather than 12 hours to arrive and Lathbury was wounded in the back and legs during the fighting. These circumstances have concealed the unsuitability of Lathbury's plan

however, which employed six widely separated landing zones before dispersing the Brigade over three separate locations spread across more than five square miles. This ruled out mutual support and breached the military maxim on maintaining focus on the primary aim. In fairness, there was not a great deal of airborne experience to draw upon in 1943, but Lathbury went on to commit exactly the same errors at Arnhem where again circumstances conspired to conceal the fact.

Lathbury's Arnhem plan was a slight reworking of an earlier scheme codenamed Comet and envisaged sending the armed Jeeps of the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron ahead to seize the Arnhem bridge followed by the Brigade's three battalions moving along three parallel and widely spaced routes. The 1st Parachute Battalion was allotted the northern route codenamed Leopard, the 3rd Parachute Battalion was assigned the centre Tiger route and the 2nd Parachute Battalion was allocated the southern Lion route along the Lower Rhine. This dispersed the Brigade's combat power, ruled out mutual support and obliged each battalion to fight in isolation and the plan thus resembled a peacetime training exercise, an impression reinforced by the objectives selected. These isolated a third of the brigade on high ground north of Arnhem, dispersed a third across the pontoon bridge, the Arnhem rail bridge and the German HQ in the centre of Arnhem with the remaining third holding the Arnhem road bridge.

Given that most of these tasks required a full battalion at minimum, the plan was a classic case of trying to do too much with too little, and virtually guaranteed that the 1st Parachute Brigade's sub-units would be isolated, overwhelmed and defeated in detail.

Once on the ground in Holland, Lathbury exacerbated the flaws in his plan by micromanaging his subordinate commanders to a degree that interfered with their ability to carry out their assigned missions. This began by needlessly holding the battalions at the landing area for over an hour before releasing them despite the



A British officer is captured in civilian clothes by Waffen-SS soldiers

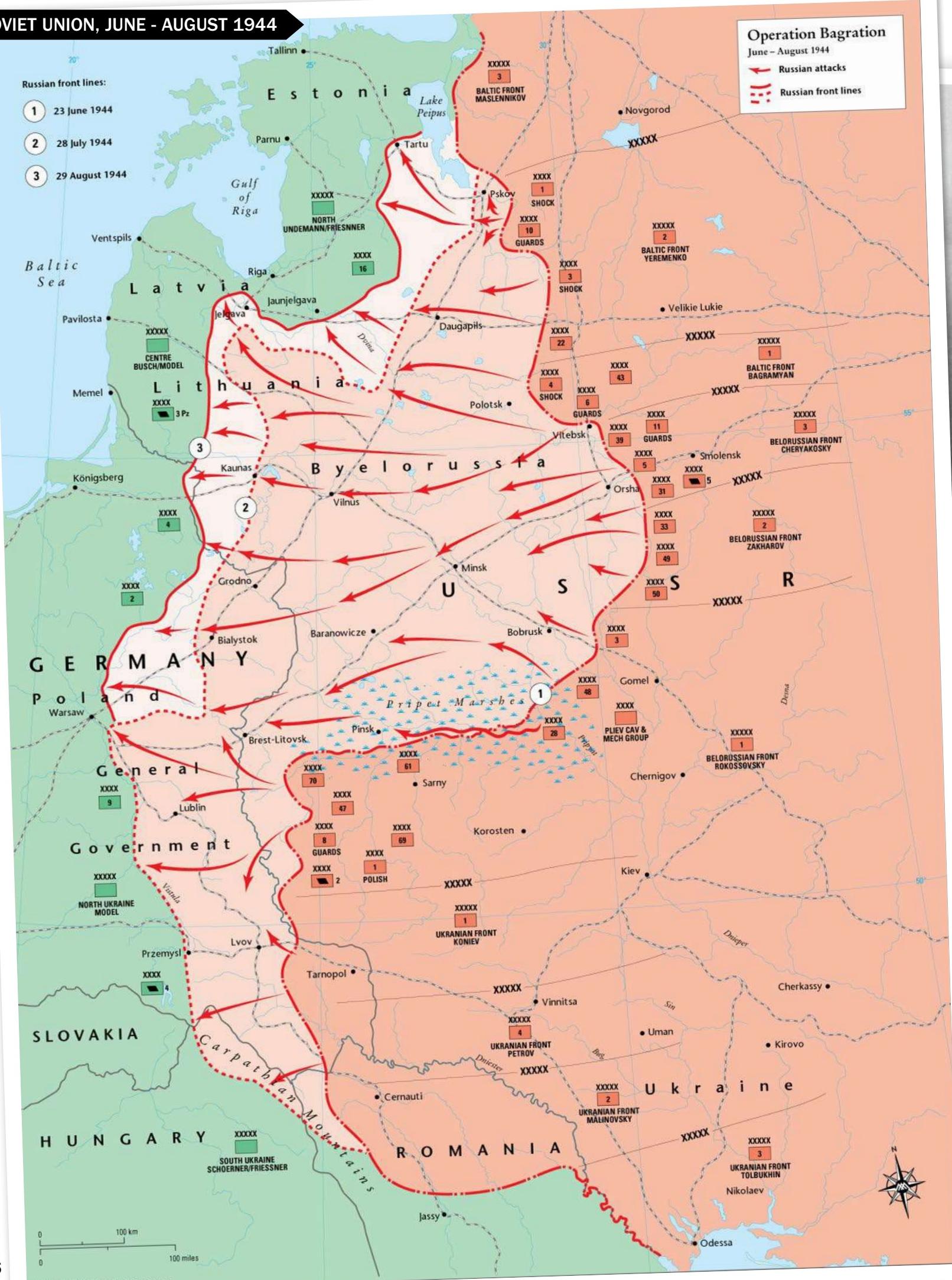
time-sensitive nature of the operation, and then motoring between the widely dispersed Battalion routes urging the commanders to greater haste.

By early evening, Lathbury was running the 3rd Parachute Battalion over the head of its commander near Oosterbeek. He ordered an unnecessary counterattack against elements of Bataillon Krafft that fired on the tail of the battalion column as it was moving away from the attackers and then compounded this by ordering the 3rd Battalion to halt in Oosterbeek for the night, presumably to protect Major-General Urquhart after he turned up unescorted at dusk. Lathbury then refused a radio appeal for assistance from his brigade major at the Arnhem road bridge, on the grounds that his men were tired.

Thereafter, he effectively abdicated command by accompanying an equally passive Urquhart in remaining with the 3rd Parachute Battalion until he was wounded and captured while attempting to regain his HQ on 18 September. All this is does not mean Lathbury was a bad officer. His inadequate planning was attributable to inexperience and lack of higher guidance. His micromanaging was presumably due to his formation's disciplinary problems, and abandoning his mission to protect his superior was likely the result of his conditioning as a Regular officer. Nonetheless, it is perhaps instructive to note that the elements of the 1st Parachute Brigade that reached the Arnhem road bridge or fought themselves to destruction trying to reach it did so without the benefit of Lathbury's direct involvement.

It can therefore be seen that there was more to the failure of the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem than popular assumptions about landing areas, drop arrangements and enemy action, and that the underlying reasons were poor planning and leadership at the brigade and division level. Given the exemplary courage and tenacity exhibited by the men of the 1st Airborne Division in Holland, it is interesting to speculate on how the Arnhem portion of Operation Market Garden might have turned out with more experienced hands at the helm.

# SOVIET UNION, JUNE - AUGUST 1944



*Soviet troops cross a pontoon bridge at the Western Bug river in July 1944*

SOVIET UNION, JUNE - AUGUST 1944

# OPERATION BAGRATION

Despite being repulsed at Kursk, in June 1944 Wehrmacht forces still occupied swathes of Soviet territory. By the summer's end they would be fleeing in the face of an unstoppable offensive that would finally break the back of the German war machine

WORDS CHARLES GINGER

Wilhelm rubbed his eyes and peered into his binoculars. Exhausted, he was sure his mind was deceiving him as he scanned the horizon in the east. It couldn't be, surely? And yet there it was – a seething mass of Soviet iron pouring across the heavily mined fields towards him, troops streaming out of the woods behind.

But he and his comrades watched them pull back these last few days. Now he realised how easily they had been fooled by yet another display of Soviet deception – 'maskirovka', as the Russians called it. Every one of those machines had rolled back into their original positions under the cover of darkness, and now they were racing towards the German positions. And the mines! They'd cleared the mines. There had been thousands of them, but now a sea of T-34s rolled across the fields unmolested.

One machine spat a burst of fire as Wilhelm reached for his rifle. A deafening roar collided with a flash of searing heat as chunks of earth and man were scattered skywards. As the world

around him began to blur, Wilhelm thought of home, of the Germany this had all been for. A land that the Soviets would soon be overrunning.

By August 1943, the Axis forces deployed on the Eastern Front were virtually spent. What would turn out to be the final Axis offensive in the east had faltered at the Battle of Kursk, enabling the Soviets to counterattack and push the invaders back by 800 kilometres (500 miles) until they halted in February 1944.

Of the three Axis armies that were on the run, Army Group South was pushed back further than the other two, creating a salient that invited the Soviets to encircle the army and destroy it. Not unreasonably, German military planners assumed that once the fighting resumed in earnest, the Soviets would aim to continue pushing forwards in the south to capture the Balkan oil fields before driving through southern Poland into Germany.

To counter this anticipated offensive, by May 1944 the majority of the Axis forces stationed in the east had been sent to reinforce the south. This was a catastrophic mistake, as the Soviets had other ideas. They were heading north.

The Soviets knew that the successful capture of Byelorussia, held by the German Army Group Centre, would precipitate the collapse of enemy lines in the east and pave the way to Germany. The Germans expected the main blow of the next Soviet offensive to fall in the south, but the Soviets thought this idea was too dangerous due to the prospect of being outflanked and met with stubborn counterattacks.

The Stavka (Soviet high command) set out their ambitious plans, with the key aims of liberating Byelorussia, liquidating Army Group Centre and clearing any other occupied states in their path of German troops. To achieve this, four armies totalling approximately 1.6 million men were husbanded, along with 32,000 artillery pieces, 5,800 tanks and 7,800 aircraft.

The First Baltic Front, commanded by General Ivan Bagramyan, would push into Latvia, while Ivan Chernyakhovsky's Third Belorussian Front would fight its way towards Vitebsk, Minsk and Vilnius. The Second Belorussian Front, under the direction of General Georgy Zakharov, would help with the encirclement of Minsk.

and the mopping up of any pockets of German resistance. Lastly, the First Belorussian Front, led personally by General Konstantin Rokossovsky, a key figure behind the entire operation, would hit Minsk from the south.

Hitler's commanders failed to appreciate the mounting threat in the north, their confusion fuelled by simultaneous Soviet plans for an attack in the south that would see Red Army soldiers smashing through Ukraine and into Poland, coupled with the Soviet use of camouflage to hide the true movements of their armoured divisions.

For their part, the Germans could put 849,000 men into the field, troops who were, as of June 1944, dug into trenches and other fortifications behind a carpet of 34,000 mines. The Axis forces were heavily reliant on these hidden explosives as they only had 3,200 field guns, 495 tanks and 602 aircraft left. Unfortunately for them, the Soviets, consummate planners as they were, had devised a way to nullify the only thing standing between them and the enemy.

Before the Soviet bombardment of 21-22 June, the Germans were already facing serious problems. Partisans of Soviet and Polish descent had been lurking behind German lines waiting for the perfect moment to inflict maximum destruction on the occupiers. On 19-20 June, they played their part in the offensive by sabotaging several railway lines with explosives, severely disrupting Wehrmacht troop movements and destroying irreplaceable materiel.

Further hampering the Germans was the designation of numerous locations as Feste Platze (fortified towns) by Adolf Hitler, positions that he ordered to be held to the last man. And so, when Soviet troops stormed forwards in their thousands on the morning of 22 June, the Germans knew they had only two options: win or die.

By the second day of the invasion, modified T-34 tanks equipped with metal rollers were clearing the remnants of the German minefields and savaging enemy positions, supported by a Soviet air force that enjoyed aerial dominance. Operation Bagration would see the Soviet concept of 'deep battle' at its zenith, a doctrine that focused on annihilating and suppressing the enemy throughout the depth of the battlefield as opposed to just at the points of contact between the two forces.

On 23 June, the Soviets lunged from the south towards the towns of Bobruisk and Mogilev – the first of which was targeted by none other than General Rokossovsky. His assault on the town, which would culminate in its capture on 29 June (Mogilev had fallen the day before), was aided in no small part by the weather. Desperate to halt the Soviet advance, the German 9th Army had rushed its Panzer divisions south, only for the majority of them to become bogged down in mud en route.

Breakthroughs were occurring all across the frontlines, and on 25 June, 30,000 troops belonging to the German 53rd Corps found



*A sea of stunned German prisoners shuffles through the streets of Moscow in the wake of their surrender during Operation Bagration.*

## **"WHEN SOVIET TROOPS STORMED FORWARDS IN THEIR THOUSANDS ON THE MORNING OF 22 JUNE, THE GERMANS KNEW THEY HAD ONLY TWO OPTIONS: WIN OR DIE"**



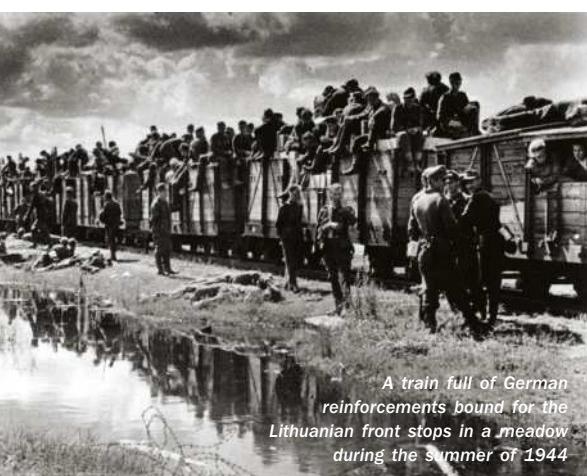
*A trio of German troops operate an anti-tank gun on the Lithuanian-Latvian border*



*Soldiers of Army Group Centre dig in and await the next Soviet onslaught. Around 3 million German troops were captured during the war in the east, with over a million dying in Soviet camps*



*German troops drive a horse-drawn carriage beneath a bridge on the Eastern Front. Despite its formidable reputation for using Panzer units to great effect, 80 per cent of the Wehrmacht was horse-drawn*



*A train full of German reinforcements bound for the Lithuanian front stops in a meadow during the summer of 1944*

themselves trapped inside Vitebsk. The bulk of the 4th and 9th armies followed suit as the Soviet pincer closed around Minsk, a manoeuvre that would ensnare a further 100,000 Germans.

As the losses mounted and the Red Army continued to smash its way further into central Europe, the German high command faced a dire situation. Losing Minsk was not an option, and by late June, Panzer divisions from Army Group North and South rumbled towards the city. Remarkably, given the Soviets' aerial superiority, the 5th Panzer Division survived relentless attacks reaching Minsk on 27 June and was immediately tasked with guarding a vital road to the city's north.

Blessed with the superior Tiger tank, the 5th Division fought valiantly to slow the Soviet advance, knocking out a series of T-34s. However, once the initial shock of encountering such stubborn resistance subsided, the 5th Division lost a staggering 141 tanks within two days.

Fighting on the outskirts of Minsk had been ferocious, and both sides were haemorrhaging men and materiel. But while the Soviets were able to rush men into the maelstrom of battle and had

## STALIN'S SUPER STRATEGIST

Konstantin Rokossovsky played a crucial role in the planning of an operation that would doom Germany to defeat

Operation Bagration may have been named after Pyotr Bagration, a general in the Imperial Russian Army during the Napoleonic Wars, but the entire offensive was largely the brainchild of one brilliant man: Konstantin Rokossovsky.

Born in 1896 in what was then Russian-controlled Warsaw, by 1910 Rokossovsky was an orphan. In 1911, he started a career in stonemasonry, but as for millions of young men, WWI would send him down a bloodier path, one that saw him serve with distinction in the Great War and the Russian Civil War of 1917 to 1923.

In 1940, Rokossovsky found himself once more in a position of command, this time as the head of the 9th Mechanised Corps. But a man of his talents was always destined for higher things, and the German invasion of the USSR in 1941 would provide him with the opportunity to prove his brilliance.

Crucial to the successful defence of Moscow, Rokossovsky then played a vital role in the Soviet victory at Stalingrad in February 1943 and then at Kursk in August of the same year. Arguably, his finest moment would come with Operation Bagration, a stunning success that Rokossovsky planned and helped execute, at one point daring to resist Stalin's demands for one focal point of attack, insisting repeatedly to the Soviet ruler that two would be required. Impressed by Rokossovsky's commitment to his vision of how the offensive should be conducted, Stalin relented. He would later make Rokossovsky a Marshal of the Soviet Union for his part in the USSR's biggest victory of WWII.



*Rokossovsky (left) in discussion with Marshal Georgy Zhukov. Without the talents and tenacity of both men it is highly likely that the Soviets would have been defeated*

the means to replenish supplies, the Germans were losing men, tanks and planes that they had no hope of replacing.

On the morning of 3 July, the Soviet 2nd Guards Tank Corps breached Minsk's outer defences, and by the day's end, the entire city was cut off, trapping 60,000 men inside. The corpses of the other 40,000 littered the rubble-strewn streets.

The German soldiers inside Minsk attempted several breakouts, all of which failed, none more spectacularly than an effort to flee on 8 July that culminated in the capture of Lieutenant General Vincenz Muller, who promptly ordered the men of the Fourth Army to lay down their arms.

Since the start of the operation, 25 Axis divisions had been eradicated, equating to 300,000 irreplaceable soldiers. The tide on the Eastern Front had ebbed and flowed since Hitler unleashed Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941, but now it had turned irreversibly in favour of the Soviets. As August 1944 loomed, they found themselves well placed to surge into Poland and the Baltic states.

Defending the latter was Army Group North, a force in no position to do anything but hamper the Red Army's rush to the Gulf of Riga, which it reached on 31 July. For the rest of the war, the 28th, 6th SS, 10th and 43rd corps would battle with remarkable tenacity to hold out in this isolated pocket.

Further south, Germans were rapidly evicted from Vilnius and Bialystok. Having gained 550 kilometres (340 miles) of territory since the operation began, advanced Soviet troops could see the outskirts of Warsaw, and when a German bid to hold out along the Vistula was beaten back as part of the Lublin-Brest offensive, the Polish capital rose up against its oppressors, initiating a savage battle that would rage until October.

Ultimately, the Soviet advance was halted on 19 August by a combination of overstretched lines, German reinforcements and dire weather. Any reprieve for the shattered Germans would be short-lived, though, and never again would the Axis powers mount an offensive in the east. Quite simply, they didn't possess the numbers: 25 per cent of their forces had been killed or captured in what represented the worst military defeat in the history of the German state.

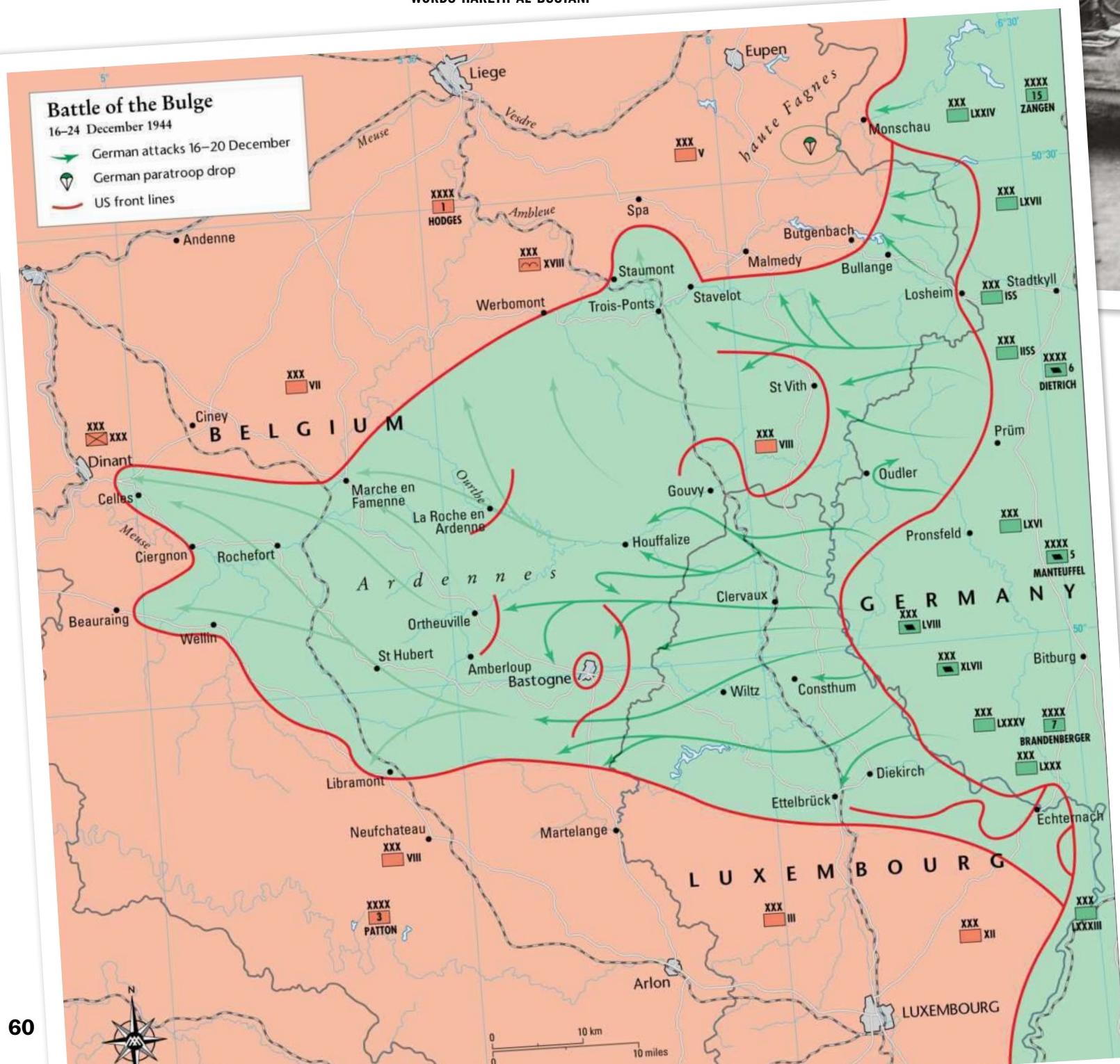
For their part, the Soviets had paid a steep price for a colossal victory, counting over 180,000 dead, 591,000 sick or wounded, 2,957 tanks lost and 822 aircraft destroyed. Most nations would have struggled to absorb such losses, but the USSR was almost unique in its capacity to weather the most brutal punishments and fight another day. At the end of Operation Bagration, nine more months of merciless fighting still lay ahead, but the victor in the war had been decided.

THE ARDENNES, DECEMBER 1944 - JANUARY 1945

# THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

After the disaster at Normandy, facing two collapsing fronts, Hitler risked it all on one last campaign, hoping to utterly crush the Allies in Europe

WORDS HARETH AL BUSTANI





*With memories of 1940 fresh in their minds, local Belgians were terrified at the prospect of a Nazi resurgence*

In the winter of 1944, following the successful Allied landings at Normandy and southern France, Hitler was on thin ice. As the British shored up the Scheldt estuary, securing the crucial supply port of Antwerp, the Canadians attacked the Netherlands. Meanwhile, the French and Americans attacked the fortified Siegfried Line and Metz to the south, engaging in brutal fighting across the Hürtgen Forest.

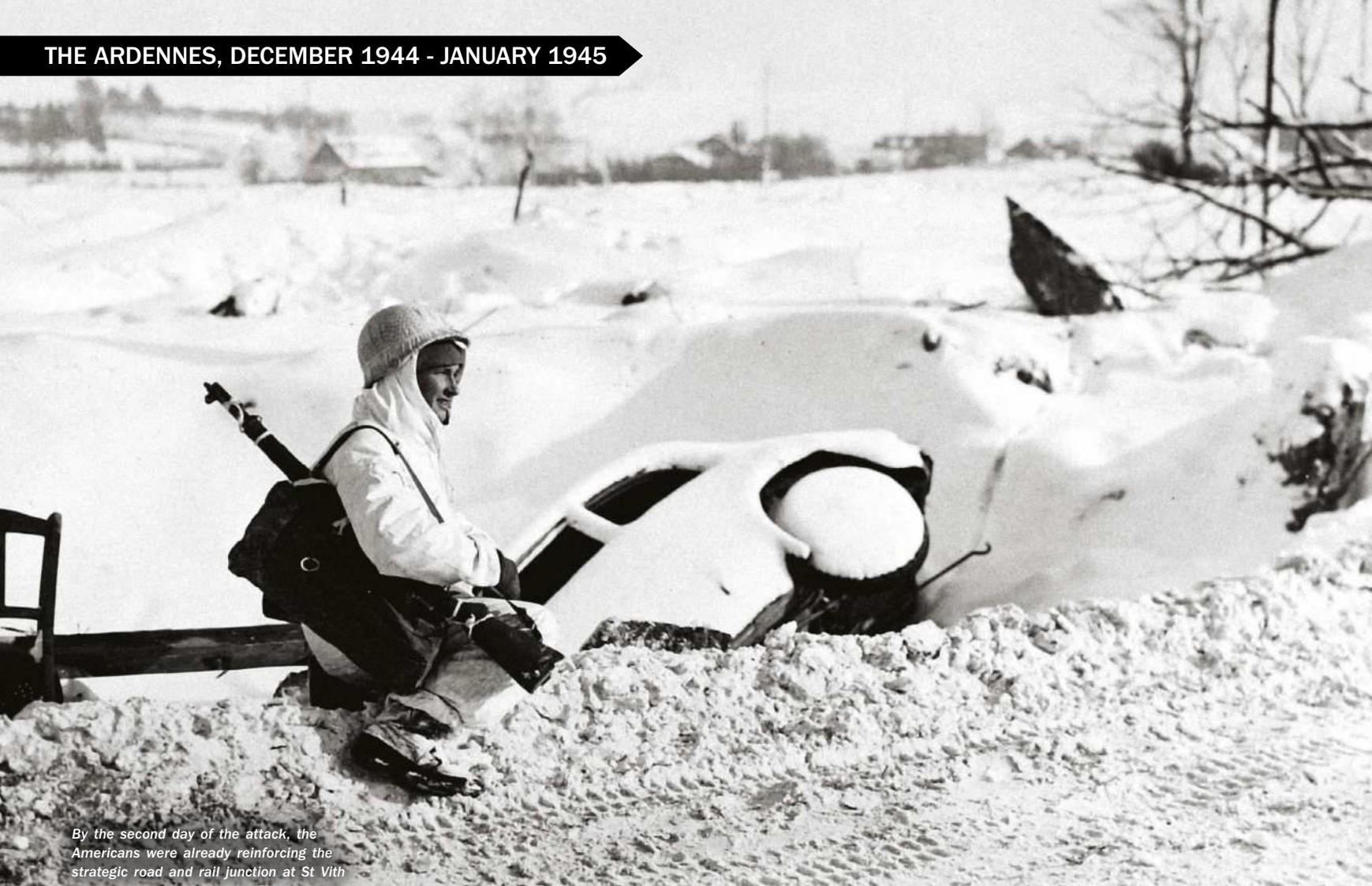
With the Nazis routed from France to Germany, and the USSR preparing an enormous winter assault in the east, it looked like Hitler's war machine had finally run out of steam. The Allies had virtually grounded the Luftwaffe, leaving the Germans unable to conduct aerial reconnaissance, and wiped out their Romanian fuel supplies.

For the American soldiers stationed in the Ardennes forest – a region spanning eastern Belgium, northeast France and Luxembourg, where the US and Germany had clashed in 1918 – things seemed particularly calm. Confident that the Nazis were incapable of launching any further offensives, American troops camped down in good spirits, with entertainers and celebrities like singer Marlene Dietrich and baseball superstar Mel Ott leisurely passing through.

Hitler, however, had other ideas. Knowing he could not survive a lengthy war on two fronts, he

*The Ardennes region was so cold, American troops had to run their vehicles every 30 minutes to keep the oil from congealing*





*By the second day of the attack, the Americans were already reinforcing the strategic road and rail junction at St Vith*

was preparing to gamble everything on a last-ditch counteroffensive. Although his generals secretly estimated his plan only had a 10% chance of succeeding, if they pulled it off, the Allies might just be wiped out in the west. Despite Germany's dire situation, being pushed into a defensive position presented some benefits. Thanks to an extensive telephone and telegraph network, the Nazis could impose a radio blackout and communicate their plans in secret. Plus, a shorter front meant fewer supply issues.

If the Nazis could break the Allied line, as they had in 1940, they would split the enemy into four armies, cutting off their supply chains, before encircling and destroying them. After, they would take back the port at Antwerp, buying enough time to develop more advanced weaponry, and force the Allies to negotiate a ceasefire on favourable terms – allowing Hitler to focus all of his efforts on the crumbling Eastern Front.

The focal point of this campaign – dubbed Operation Watch on the Rhine – was a 37-mile front centred on the Americans at the Ardennes. Forced to move under the cloak of night and fog, the Germans knew that their only hope of success was to reach the River Meuse within four days; any longer would give the Allies enough time to establish their positions. Desperately low on fuel, they would also have to capture resources along the way.

The bulk of the forces was concentrated in the north, where a road network straddling the

## "ISOLATED AND CONFUSED, THE AMERICANS HELD OUT IN SMALL POCKETS OF RESISTANCE, DELAYING ARMoured SPEARHEADS WITH BITTER DEFENCES AT STRATEGIC CROSSROADS"

German border provided the most direct path over the Meuse River to the city of Liège. Here, the 6th Panzer Army was reinforced with two Waffen-SS Panzer Corps and two-thirds of the offensive's armoured forces. They were to storm northwest to Antwerp, creating a barrier behind the British rear, and the northernmost American troops.

In the centre, the 5th Panzer Army was sent to smash through the American front, sweep west and then swing north to Antwerp, guarding the 6th Panzer's flank and capturing alternate routes to the Meuse, cutting off the southern American forces. Meanwhile, further south, with virtually no armoured forces, the light 7th Army was sent to traverse the mountains near Luxembourg, creating a defensive line against reinforcements.

The Germans launched their assault in the early hours of 16 December. The cold mist clinging to the air was suddenly split by the howls of 1,600 pieces of artillery bombarding an 80-mile front. Suddenly, 1,000 tanks poured through the forest, clearing the way with flamethrowers. In the north, the 6th Panzer Army attacked the Losheim Gap and Elsenborn Ridge, in an attempt to smash through to Liège.

By the end of the first day, the Germans had punched a hole in the American line, surrounding its infantry division, taking several crossroads and splitting the American lines with an almighty 'bulge'. With telephone lines destroyed and memories of 1940 still fresh in their minds, the Belgian townsfolk quickly hid their Allied flags and replaced them with Swastikas.

For the American soldiers, hunkered down in the snow, facing such a huge line with limited information, was a harrowing experience. Isolated and confused, they held out in small pockets of resistance, delaying armoured spearheads with bitter defences at strategic crossroads against overwhelming odds.

Meanwhile, as part of 'Operation Grief', English-speaking Germans snuck behind the American lines, disguised as Allied troops. Muddying the waters and causing chaos, they forced US soldiers to develop a network of checkpoints, where they drilled servicemen on American trivia – the name of Mickey Mouse's girlfriend, baseball scores and US State capitals. When caught, the Germans would obfuscate further, claiming their mission was to

## ATROCITIES AT THE ARDENNES

Amidst the carnage, Nazi soldiers continued to carry out war crimes

By late 1944, atrocities were commonplace throughout the German armed forces, especially the Waffen SS. With their backs against the ropes, Nazi soldiers were more desperate and depraved than ever. In the early stages of the Ardennes Offensive, on 17 December, in one of the campaign's most successful manoeuvres, Joachim Peiper's 1st SS Leibstandarte "Adolf Hitler" Division overwhelmed and captured 113 American soldiers near the town of Malmedy. Peiper and his troops had made a habit of executing prisoners as a 'shock and awe' tactic, designed to demoralise the enemy.

An hour after Peiper pressed ahead, the American soldiers were sent into a field near a crossroads and massacred for sport. The bloodbath began when a tank crew began firing randomly at the POWs, and before long, they were joined by machine gunners and passing vehicles. After the carnage, foot soldiers swept through and shot the survivors in the head at point-blank range – killing 84. With the Nazis in a rush, some Americans were able to feign death and sneak themselves into the local Belgian populace. Another less publicised massacre was committed in Wereth the same day, where 11 Black POWs were tortured and shot.

After the war, the American prosecutors bungled the subsequent trial, allowing the SS perpetrators to escape with just a few years in prison. Peiper was later murdered in France in 1976 when his house was set on fire.



*At Malmedy, members of the 1st SS Leibstandarte massacred 84 American POWs*



*The battle's most successful German manoeuvre saw the 1st SS Division overwhelm and capture 113 Americans near Malmedy, before massacring them*



*Desperate and short on supplies, German soldiers stole what equipment and fuel they could*

kill Eisenhower in Paris. Captured in American uniform, they were promptly executed.

Although snowstorms had offered the Nazis the element of surprise, they also left them fighting through mud, creating traffic jams. To make matters worse, at the critical town of Lanzerath, which guarded a key route to the Losheim Gap, 22 American troops held off 500 Germans for ten hours – killing 92 in the process, creating a bottleneck.

The Americans also offered stiff resistance at Rocherath-Krinkelt, denying the 277th Volksgrenadier Division a swift romp up to the high ground of Elsenborn Ridge and the vast supplies sat near the cities of Liège and Spa. Undeterred, Kampfgruppe Peiper, led by Lieutenant Colonel Joachim Peiper took Honsfield, killing scores of Americans and capturing 190,000 litres of fuel before pressing through Büllingen. In the ensuing days, he would embark on a murderous rampage.

However, unable to wrestle Stavelot from the Americans, on 18 December, he moved on, only to find multiple bridges and fuel supplies destroyed by US engineers. As he crossed over the Meuse, taking Stoutmont at great cost, he learned that his rearguard had failed to crush Stavelot, leaving him cut off from the rest of the 1st SS Panzer Division. Desperate, he pulled back to the village of La Gleize to await a relief force that never came. His men were eventually forced to flee, leaving their vehicles and equipment behind.

Caught completely off-guard by the offensive, as the Germans burst through their lines, a group of shocked Allied commanders met in a bunker on 19 December in Verdun. Hundreds of thousands of Nazi soldiers had poured through their lines, creating a bulge 70 miles wide and 50 miles deep.

Undeterred, General Dwight D. Eisenhower reassured the room that fighting the Germans on a defensive footing actually suited the Allies' position: "The present situation is to be regarded as one of opportunity for us and not of disaster. There will only be cheerful faces at this table." Inspired, Lieutenant General George Patton replied: "Hell, let's have the guts to let the bastards go all the way to Paris. Then, we'll really cut 'em off and chew 'em up."

Eisenhower and Patton contrasted Germany's delays with a rapid response – with the latter swinging his Third US Army north and slamming it into the German flank in a matter of days. With the quickest northern routes already fortified and reinforced, the focus shifted to General Hasso von Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army in the centre – which had followed a more indirect route through Bastogne. The 5th Panzer Army proved the most impactful of the entire offensive, bursting through the American line and rapidly overwhelming two of the 106th Infantry Division's regiments – forcing the largest surrender of American troops in Europe of the entire war.

The regiment followed up by ramming two Panzer divisions into the subsequent vacuum – but did so prematurely. So long as the Americans still held the critical road and rail junction at St. Vith, the breach was incomplete – and the longer it took, the more rapidly Germany's chances faded. By the second day of the attack, the Americans were already reinforcing the position.

However, the commander of the US CCB/7th Armored Division, Brigadier General Bruce Clark was shocked to learn the group had no communications with two besieged regiments on the Schnee Eifel, where the 106th had been overwhelmed. As the Germans approached from the east, gunshots began to ring out, and the



*Thinking the Germans incapable of launching any further offensives, the Americans at the Ardennes were caught completely off guard*

local Major General handed control to Clark – who, despite being junior, was the only officer at the headquarters with combat experience.

The 5th Panzer's General Manteuffel had always thought Hitler's Ardennes plans too ambitious and was particularly enraged by the opening salvo of artillery – which had alerted the Americans to their movements without causing significant strategic damage. His priority was to take St. Vith on the first day of his assault, gaining access to a crucial east-west rail line, before moving his forces on to seize the ridge west of the River Our.

He desperately hoped the 7th Army would be able to cover the left flank as he approached Bastogne. The 7th's chances were slim; Hitler refused Manteuffel's request to allocate them a mechanised unit. With his forces split into two, and the 6th Panzer floundering in the north, Manteuffel was so desperate he committed the Fuehrer Begleit Brigade, which was supposed to be saved for later in the campaign, to the operation. However, aided by reinforcements, the 101st Airborne at Bastogne held firm – forcing the Germans to swing past on either side, cutting it off, but failing to secure the crossroads.

## THE BLACK PANTHERS

At the Ardennes, WWII's first Black American tank battalion paved the way for the desegregation of the armed forces

During the war, American military units were still segregated based on race. However, following in the footsteps of the Harlem Hellfighters who had served in WWI, members of the Black 761st Tank Battalion carried forth a legacy of Black military excellence.

Sergeant William McBurney joined the military to disprove his father's belief that "a Black man would never fly an airplane... for this country". Though he was refused as a pilot, he was directed to the mechanised unit, the 761st.

In January, desperate for reinforcements, the US sent the worn-out battalion, dubbed 'the Black Panthers' to take the Belgian town of Tillet from the elite Führer Begleit Brigade. The fighting reached a bloody peak on 9 January, when ten Shermans clashed with German tanks, anti-tank guns and troops.

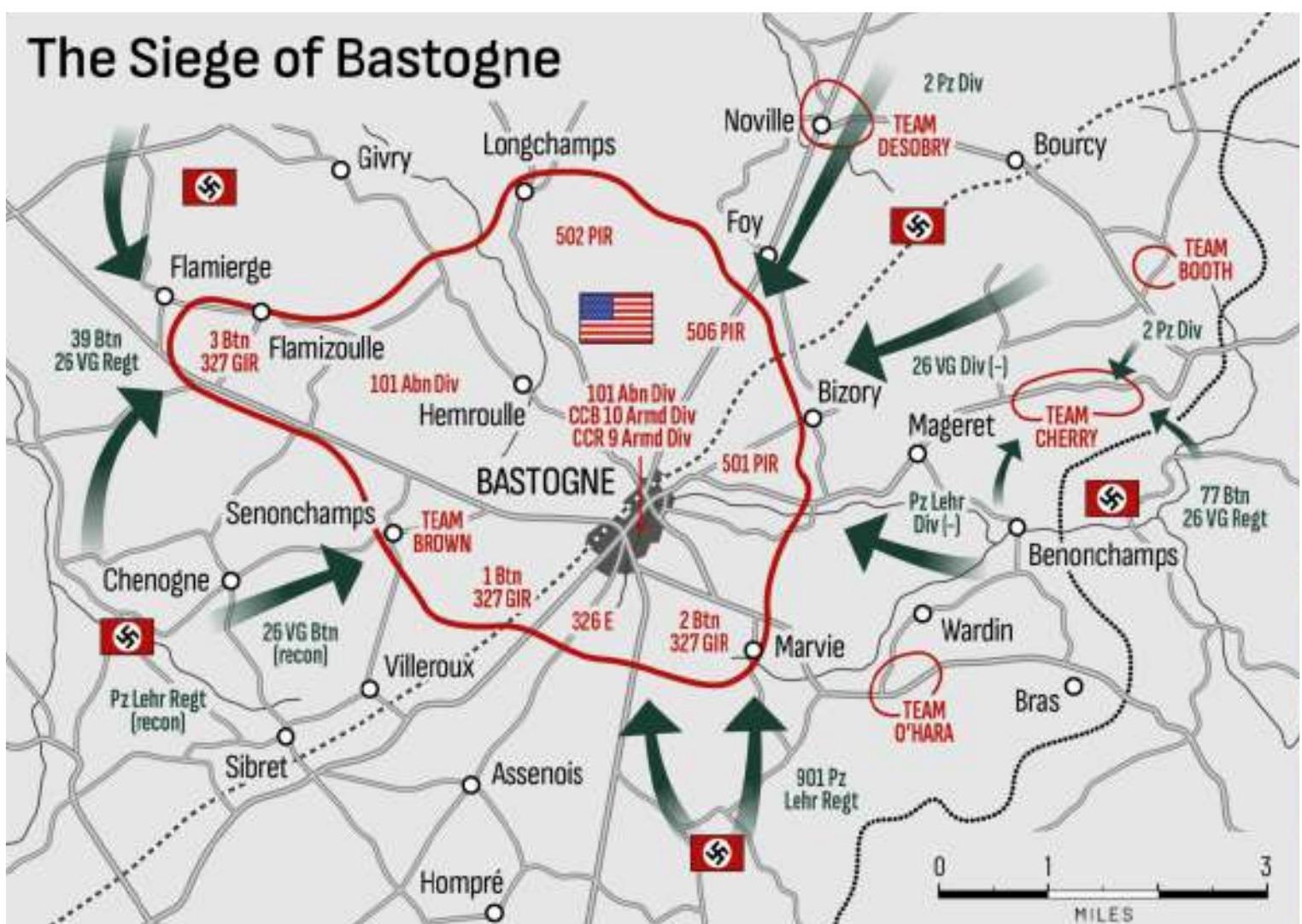
After rescuing a fellow sergeant whose tank had been destroyed, McBurney went behind enemy lines, raising havoc until his tank was also taken out. He and two others waded three miles through the snow, under heavy fire, before climbing into another tank and returning to the fray.



*Despite being exhausted by earlier fighting, the Black Panthers were recommitted to the Battle of the Bulge, playing a decisive role in the counteroffensive*

The first Black American tank battalion to fight in the war, the Black Panthers amassed nearly 400 decorations during the Battle of the Bulge. Their actions helped convince Eisenhower to integrate service in the armed forces – a major milestone on the path to desegregation in the United States.

# The Siege of Bastogne



By 22 December, with Allied artillery restricted to ten rounds per day, conditions in Bastogne were dire: running out of food, arms and supplies, the Americans were outnumbered, outgunned and completely surrounded. Until now they had held strong, destroying German tanks with 155m guns, firing bazookas at their treads, and even sometimes scaling them and throwing grenades inside. Co-ordinating his defence from foxholes, and rat-infested basements, when the Nazis demanded Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe surrender or face annihilation, he famously responded: "Aw, nuts!"

On Christmas Day, a major German attack was beaten back, with all its tanks destroyed, and the following day, Patton's 4th Armored Division smashed open a corridor to Bastogne, a major milestone in the Allied counteroffensive. Germany was not only way behind schedule but had overextended its supply lines, running out of ammunition and fuel. By now it was clear to most German generals that the entire offensive had failed. The US had already managed to move

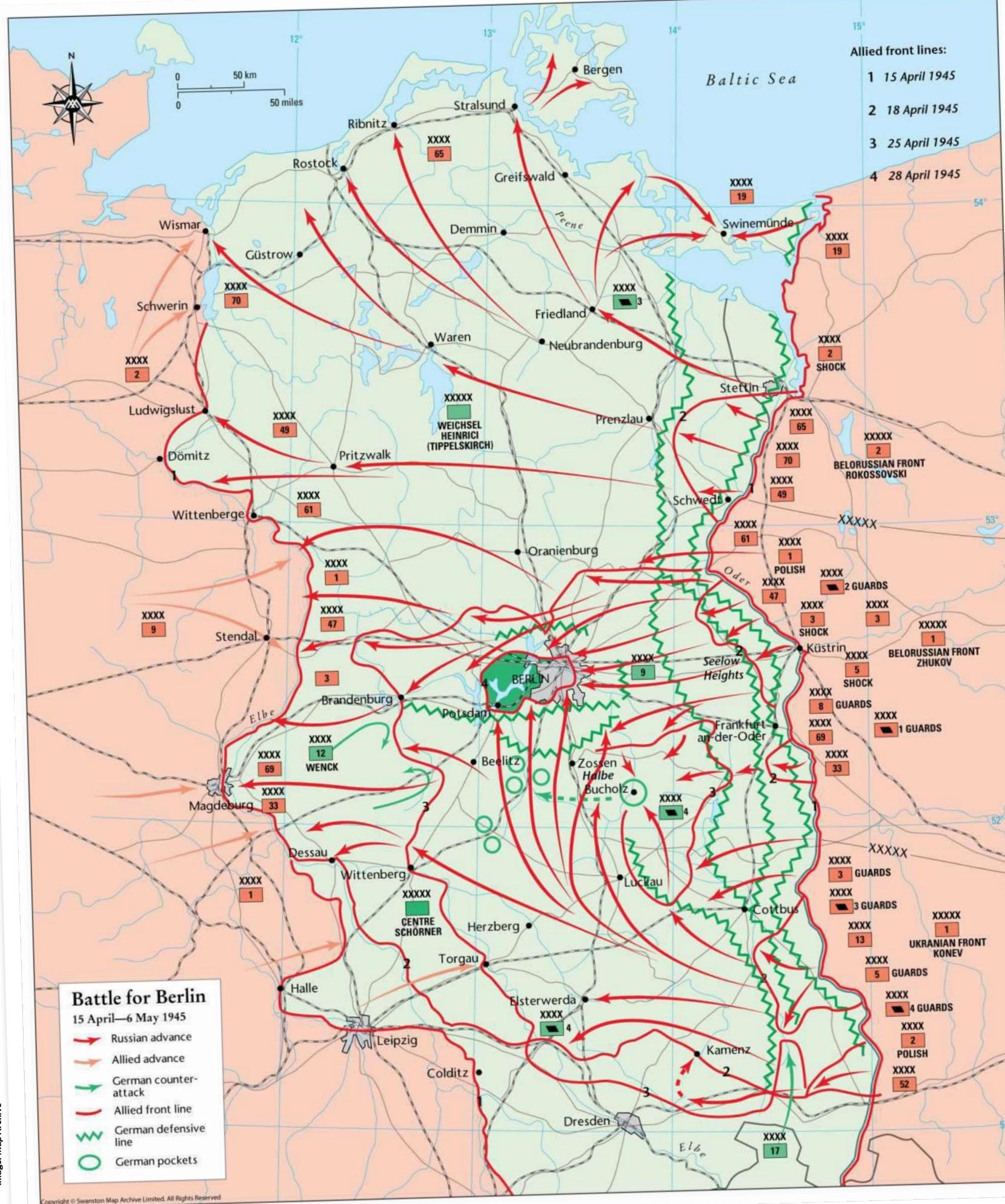
in 250,000 reinforcements and having only endured relatively light losses, General Hasso von Manteuffel wanted to withdraw to the West Wall. Hitler refused.

On New Year's Day, the Luftwaffe launched a sweeping attack, smashing Allied airfields in the Low Countries – destroying or damaging 465 planes but losing 277 in the process. Like the Ardennes campaign, it would prove to be a Pyrrhic victory. While the Allies were able to recover in days, the Luftwaffe never would – remaining virtually grounded for the rest of the war. From Bastogne, Patton's Third Army ventured north, while Montgomery attacked south – with the two meeting at Houffalize. Maintaining the momentum, the Americans ran their trucks every half hour to keep the oil from congealing.

The Allies launched a massive offensive on 3 January, by which time most Germans had retreated, abandoning their heavy equipment. By 7 January, even Hitler had conceded the plan had failed, withdrawing and ending all offensive operations. Churchill later told the House of

Commons: "This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American victory". Throughout January, Allied soldiers waded through deep snow, chipping away at the sides of the shrinking bulge. In February, the Germans were back where they had started six weeks prior, having suffered huge losses in the process. The Allies, meanwhile, were storming across the Western Front.

Out of 610,000 American troops, estimates of US casualties range from 70,000 to 108,000 – with roughly 19,000 killed. Despite being the bloodiest battle the Americans faced during the war, it also cost the Germans dearly. The Nazis, who had committed 410,000 men, lost up to 100,000; not to mention 2,600 pieces of artillery, 1,600 anti-tank guns and 1,000 combat aircraft. It was a crippling defeat they could ill-afford to concede with the war closing in on both fronts. With the Nazis incapable of launching any further assaults, war was finally coming to Germany.



GERMANY, APRIL - MAY 1945

# THE BATTLE OF BERLIN

Amid the rubble of the Nazi capital, the Soviet Red Army brought Hitler's Third Reich to a violent end

WORDS MIKE HASKEW

**B**y the spring of 1945, the Second World War was in its sixth year. The once mighty war machine of the Third Reich had been brought to its knees. Assailed from both the east and west, Nazi Germany was in its death throes.

Since the beginning, Allied forces had been buoyed by the cry, "On to Berlin!" Now, however, practical considerations weighed heavily on the conduct of the final weeks of the war. General Dwight D Eisenhower, supreme commander of the American and British armies advancing across the western German frontier, breached protocol and contacted Soviet Premier Josef Stalin directly, informing him that the Western Allies did not intend to fight for Berlin. For several reasons, both political and military, the battle for the Nazi capital and whatever glory might come with its capture would be left to the Soviet Red Army.

Indeed, since Hitler had launched Operation Barbarossa – the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 – the Soviets had suffered mightily and borne the brunt of the fighting on the European continent. Millions of Soviet military and civilian lives had been lost before the Nazi juggernaut was even stemmed only 20 kilometres from the Soviet capital of Moscow, Russia. German generals peered at the gleaming onion domes of the city's buildings but could get no closer. Winter set in, and the Germans literally froze to death, while weapons and equipment failed to function in such inhospitable conditions.

The following spring, a renewed German offensive was met by a resurgent Red Army, and then the great Soviet victories at Stalingrad and Kursk occurred in 1943. Seizing the initiative, the Soviets pushed the Germans westward across thousands of kilometres, reaching Warsaw, the Polish capital, in the summer of 1944. Soviet offensives from Leningrad in the north to Odessa in the south were known as 'Stalin's ten blows'. By early 1945, East Prussia, the Baltic States, and Pomerania were in Soviet possession. The

Red Army advanced from the River Vistula to the River Oder, and then to within 60 kilometres of Berlin.

On 1 April, Stalin and two of his top commanders, Marshal Georgi Zhukov of the 1st Belorussian Front and Marshal Ivan Konev of the 1st Ukrainian Front, met at the Kremlin in Moscow. "Who will take Berlin?" Stalin asked. "We will!" Konev answered. Stalin proceeded to give the two commanders their orders. Zhukov was to attack Berlin from the north and east, while Konev approached from the south. The two immense fronts would surround Berlin in a giant pincer and destroy the opposing forces in an ever-shrinking defensive perimeter.

Two weeks later, the final offensive began with the thunder of thousands of Soviet guns. Konev's advance across the River Neisse gained ground steadily, but Zhukov failed to accurately assess the strength of the main German line of resistance before Berlin at Seelow Heights just west of the Oder, where elements of Army Group Vistula, outmanned and outgunned but full of fight and Nazi fervour, made a stand along a ridgeline. Under the command of Colonel General Gotthard Heinrici, the defenders pulled back from frontline positions just as the Soviet artillery bombardment erupted; therefore, most of the shelling failed to inflict heavy casualties. German tanks and tank-killing infantry squads saw the silhouettes of Red Army armoured vehicles and troops illuminated by their own searchlights and took a fearful toll, stalling Zhukov's advance.

After four days of fierce fighting, Zhukov broke through the Seelow Heights defences, but the cost was high. No fewer than 30,000 Red Army soldiers were dead, along with 12,000 German troops. Stalin was enraged by the delay and ordered Konev to abandon his wider swing around Berlin and send his armoured spearheads directly towards the city. The existing rivalry

between Zhukov and Konev became heated as both commanders vied for the prestige of capturing the Nazi capital.

20 April 1945, was Hitler's 56th birthday, but there was little revelry in the Führerbunker beneath the Reich Chancellery in Berlin that day. Soviet long-range artillery began shelling the capital, and the guns would not cease firing until the city had fallen. Word reached the Führer in his subterranean command centre that three defensive lines east of Berlin had been breached, including Seelow Heights. Zhukov was advancing. Konev was in open country and moving steadily with the 4th Guards Tank Army and 3rd Guards Army leading the way. A third Red Army Front, the 2nd Belorussian under Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky, had broken through the 3rd Panzer Army's lines. Inside Berlin, the remnants of Army and Waffen-SS units prepared makeshift defences. Old men and boys joined these soldiers for a fight to the death once the Soviets entered the city.

Territorial gains brought Berlin within range of field artillery on 22 April. A Red Army news correspondent came upon several guns preparing to unleash a storm of shells on the German capital. He later wrote, "What are the targets? I asked the battery commander. 'Centre of Berlin, Spree bridges, and the northern Stettin railway stations,' he answered.



Then came the tremendous words of command: 'Open fire on the capital of Fascist Germany.' I noted the time. It was exactly 8.30am on 22 April. 96 shells fell on the centre of Berlin in the course of a few minutes."

Both Zhukov and Konev ordered a continued westward advance, and on 25 April, the leading elements of a Guards rifle regiment from the 1st Ukrainian Front made contact with troops of the US 69th Infantry Division at Torgau on the River Elbe, splitting the Third Reich in two. On the same day, the encirclement of Berlin was completed. Both the German 9th and 4th Panzer Armies were surrounded, and efforts by the 12th Army under General Walther Wenck to move to the relief of Berlin were thwarted by the westward movement of the 1st Ukrainian Front.

As the Soviet noose tightened around Berlin, probing attacks tested the city's defences. The Germans had divided three concentric rings into nine sectors. About 96.5 kilometres in circumference, the outermost ring ran across the outskirts of the capital. Flimsy at best, it consisted primarily of roadblocks, barricades of rubble and vehicles, and shallow trenches. It was compromised rapidly in numerous locations prior to the main assault on the city.

The second circle ran approximately 40 kilometres and made use of existing buildings and obstacles, including the S-Bahn, Berlin's public transportation railway system. The inner ring included the massive buildings that once housed the ministries and departments of the Nazi government. These were turned into machine-gun and anti-tank strongpoints with firing positions on each floor.

Six massive flak towers, studded with guns and virtually impervious to anything but a direct hit, were also part of the inner circle. Eight of the pie-shaped dividing sectors, that were labelled A through H and radiating from the centre of Berlin, crossed each of the rings to the outer perimeter. The ninth sector, named Z, was manned partially by a fanatical contingent of Hitler's personal SS guard.

The city of Berlin itself comprised 547 square kilometres, and defensive positions along the barriers of the River Spree and the Landwehr and Teltow Canals were particularly fortified. The main objective of the converging Soviet forces was the complex of government buildings known as the Citadel, north and east of the Tiergarten, a large park and residential district that was home to the Berlin Zoo.

Estimates of German strength vary from roughly 100,000 to 180,000, including SS, Army, Volkssturm (People's Militia), and Hitler Youth, under the command of General Helmuth Weidling, appointed by the Führer on 23 April to lead the last-gasp defence.

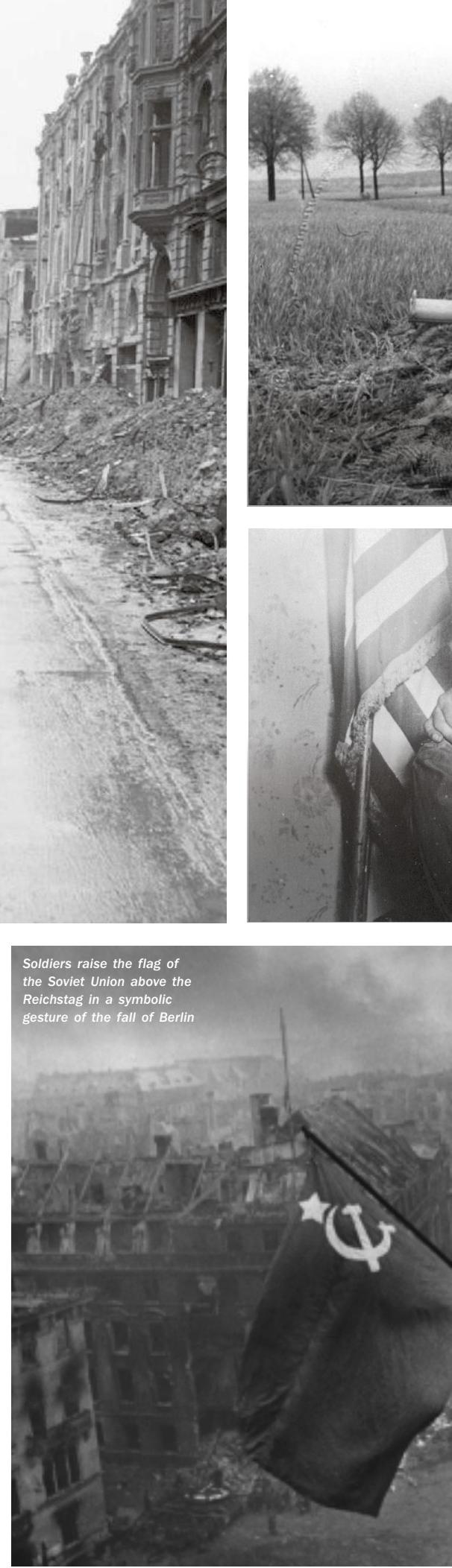
On 26 April, the final chapter of the battle for Berlin began with a fury. The 8th Guards and 1st Guards Tank Armies fought their way through the second defensive circle, crossing the S-Bahn line



*In this July 1945 photo, a heavily damaged street near the Unter den Linden in the centre of Berlin remains devastated*

and attacking Tempelhof Airport. To the west, elements of the 1st Belorussian Front entered Charlottenburg and drew up to the River Spree after two days of bitter combat. The Soviets advanced inexorably toward the centre of Berlin on four primary axes, along the Frankfurter Allee from the southeast, Sonnenallee from the south toward the Belle-Alliance-Platz, again from the south toward the Potsdamer Platz, and from the north toward the Reichstag, where the German Parliament had once convened and which had not been in use since a devastating fire had gutted the building in 1933.

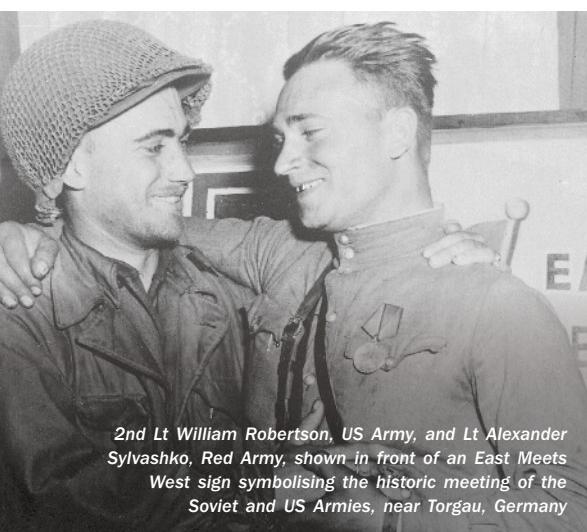
On 28 April, the Potsdamerstrasse Bridge across the Landwehr Canal was taken, and fighting spread into the Tiergarten. The next morning, the 3rd Shock Army crossed the Moltke Bridge over the River Spree. The Reichstag lay to the left fronting the Königsplatz, which was mined and heavily defended by machine-gun nests, artillery, several tanks and a mixed bag of roughly 6,000 Germans. Attacks on the Interior Ministry building progressed sluggishly, and by dawn on 30 April, Red Army soldiers occupied Gestapo headquarters on Prinz Albrechtstrasse for a brief time before a heavy counterattack pushed them out. The Soviets did capture most of the diplomatic quarter that day.



*Soldiers raise the flag of the Soviet Union above the Reichstag in a symbolic gesture of the fall of Berlin*



*A soldier of the Volkssturm holds a Panzerschreck anti-tank weapon on the outskirts of Berlin*



*2nd Lt William Robertson, US Army, and Lt Alexander Sylvashko, Red Army, shown in front of an East Meets West sign symbolising the historic meeting of the Soviet and US Armies, near Torgau, Germany*



Meanwhile, the 79th Rifle Corps began a concerted effort to take the Reichstag. Troops of the 150th Rifle Division ran a gauntlet of fire across the Königsplatz in a frontal assault. Other divisions attacked the flanks of the large building, and three attempts were beaten back between 4.30am and 1pm. The defenders were aided by 128mm guns atop one of the reinforced concrete flak towers at the Berlin Zoo firing from over a kilometre away. Soviet tanks and self-propelled assault guns lumbered into the Königsplatz to blast German positions.

A false report that a red banner had been seen flying above the Reichstag was issued at mid-afternoon when the attackers had managed to advance only partially across the Königsplatz. Fearing the repercussions that might ensue if the report were found to be inaccurate, Major General VM Shatilov, commanding the 150th Rifle Division, ordered a redoubling of the effort.

By 6pm, the fight for the Reichstag had raged 14 hours. Soviet soldiers renewed the attack, carrying small mortars to blast open entryways that had been covered with brick and mortar. Once inside, the Soviets clashed with Germans in hand-to-hand combat throughout the building.

A small group of Red Army soldiers worked their way around the back of the Reichstag and found a stairway to the roof. Sergeants Mikhail Yegorov and Meliton Kantaria rushed forward with a red banner and found an equestrian

statue at the edge of the roofline. Minutes before 1pm, they jammed the staff into a space in the statue.

Although the hammer and sickle flag of the Soviet Union flew above the Reichstag on the night of 30 April, the building was not secured until 2 May, when the last 2,500 German defenders surrendered. The famed photos and footage of the flag raising were actually taken during a reenactment of the event on 3 May.

The Germans still forlornly defending Berlin were exhausted and running low on ammunition. General Weidling informed Hitler on the morning of 30 April that in a matter of hours the Red Army would be in control of the centre of the city.

The Soviet 5th Shock, 8th Guards, and 8th Guards Tank Armies advanced down the famed Unter den Linden, approaching the Reich Chancellery and the Führerbunker. Hitler authorised General Weidling to attempt a breakout from the encirclement that had formed, and then with his longtime mistress, Eva Braun, who had become his wife only hours earlier, committed suicide in the underground labyrinth.

By this time, only about 10,000 resolute German soldiers remained in defensive positions, and Soviet troops and tanks were closing in from all sides. Soviet artillery pounded the remaining defenders, relentlessly shelling the Air Ministry building on the Wilhelmstrasse, a strong position that had been reinforced with steel, concrete, and barricades. The 3rd

Shock Army advanced along the northern edge of the Tiergarten and battled a cluster of German tanks while maintaining pressure on the Reichstag and the surrounding area. In concert with the movement of the 8th Guards Army, the 3rd Shock Army cut the centre of Berlin in half.

On 1 May, General Hans Krebs, chief of the German General Staff, contacted General Vasily Chuikov, commander of the 8th Guards Army, informing the Soviet officer of Hitler's death and hoping to arrange surrender terms. The attempt failed when Chuikov insisted on unconditional surrender and Krebs responded that he did not have such authority.

Meanwhile, some of the German troops began attempting to break out of embattled Berlin, particularly toward the west and a hopeful surrender to British or American forces rather than the vengeful Soviet Red Army, whose people had suffered so much at the hands of the Nazis. Only a relative few succeeded after crossing the Charlottenbrücke Bridge over the River Havel. Many were killed or captured when they abruptly encountered Soviet lines.

On the morning of 2 May, Red Army troops took control of the Reich Chancellery. Weidling had already sent a communiqué to General Chuikov at 1am, asking for another meeting. The German general was instructed to come to the Potsdamer Bridge at 6am. He was then taken to Chuikov's headquarters and surrendered within the hour.

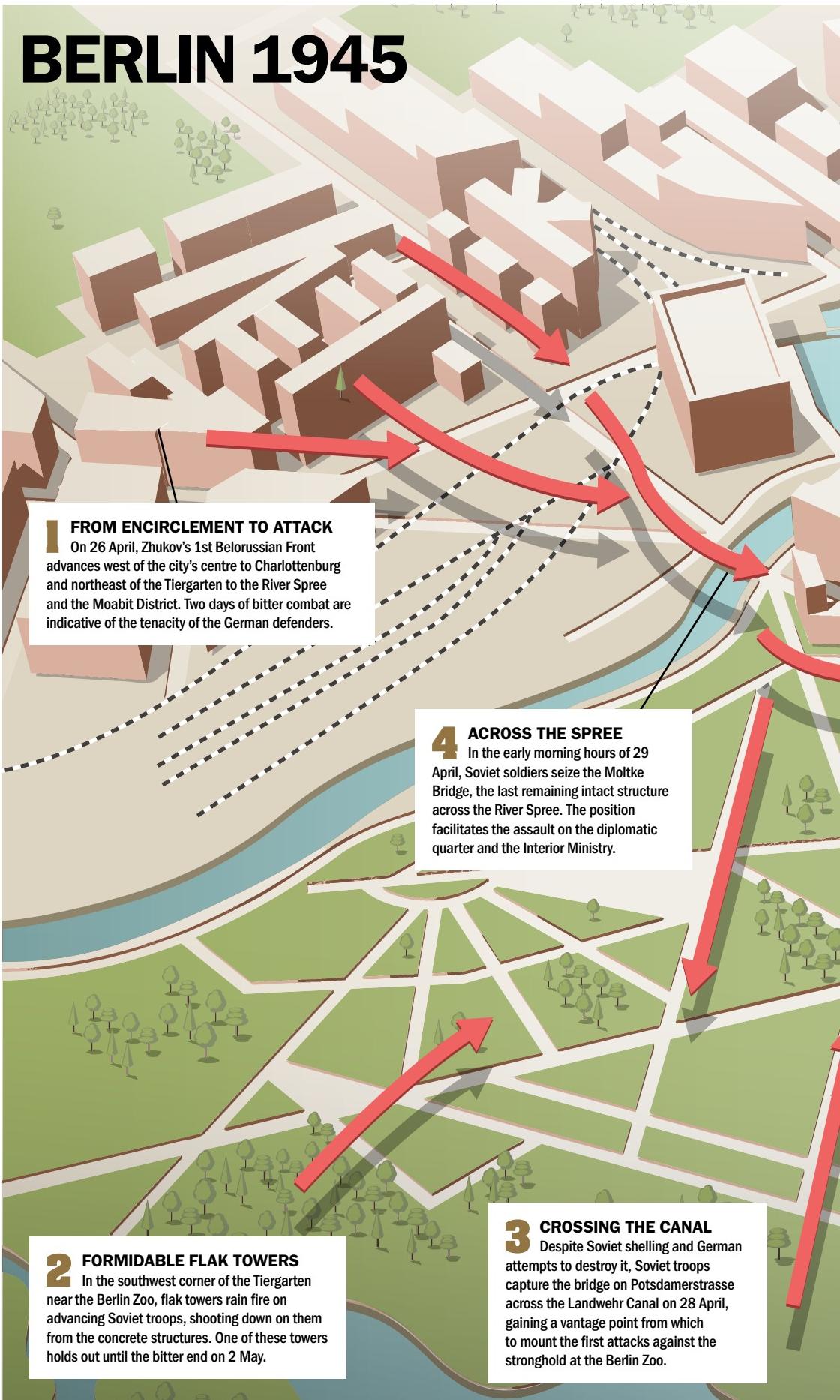
Weidling issued orders for all German troops to follow suit and put the directive in writing at Chuikov's request. He also made a recording of the order, and Soviet trucks blared the message through the shattered streets of the city. Some pockets of diehard SS troops resisted until they were annihilated. At the rouslesome Berlin Zoo flak tower, 350 haggard German soldiers stumbled into the daylight of defeat. The Battle of Berlin was over.

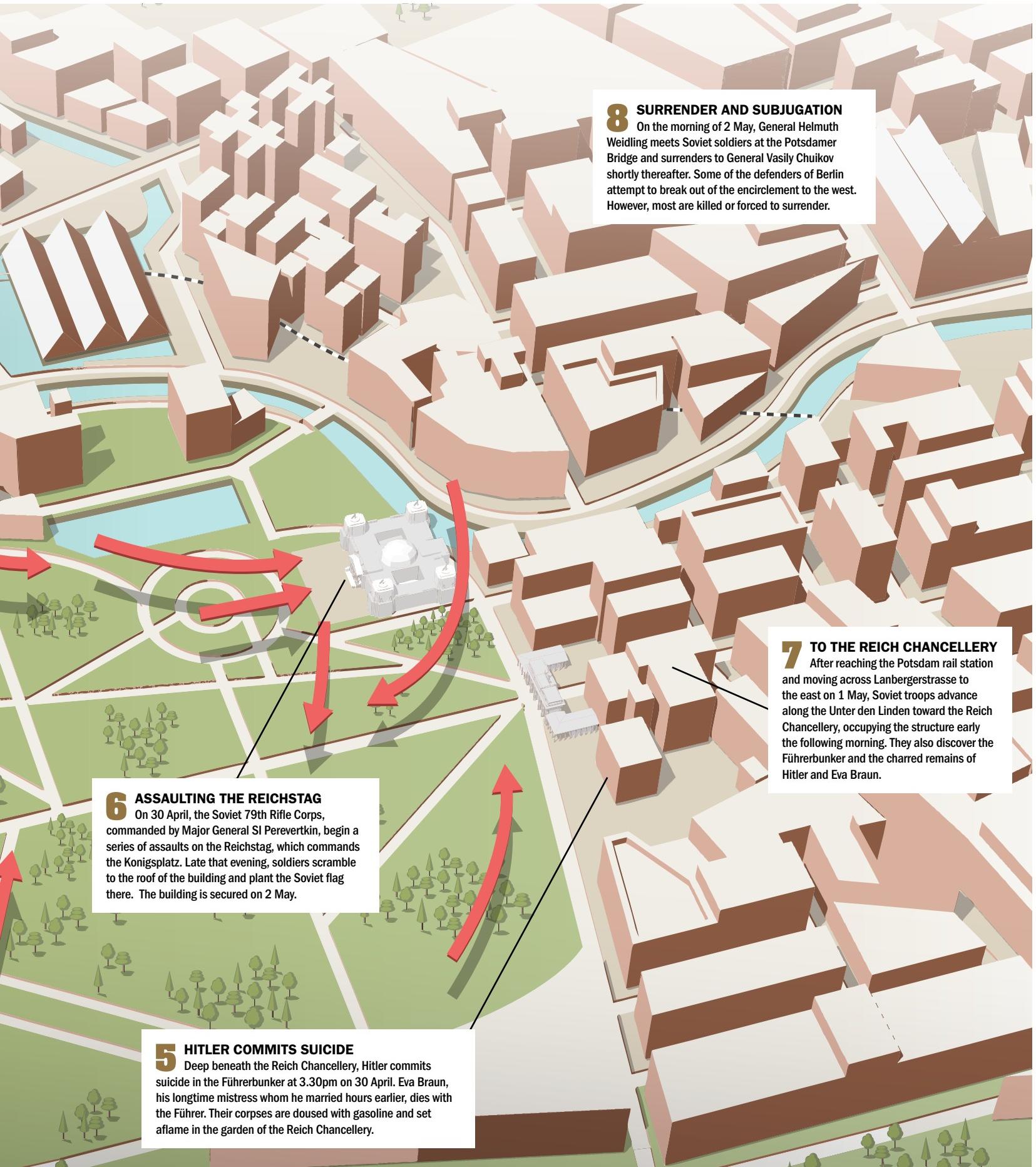
Casualties were staggering. During the drive from the Oder to Berlin, at least 81,000 Soviet soldiers had died and well over a quarter million were wounded. German losses are estimated at 100,000 killed, 220,000 wounded, and nearly half a million taken prisoner. At least 100,000 civilian residents of Berlin, some of whom committed suicide, had also perished.

Red Army soldiers raped and murdered countless German women. They destroyed and pillaged in retribution for the horrors previously inflicted on their Motherland by the Nazis. For some Berliners who survived the battle, the nightmare of Soviet vengeance was – perhaps – a fate worse than death.

Within a week of the fall of Berlin, World War II in Europe ended with the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. The Third Reich, which Hitler boasted would last 1,000 years, had ended in fiery ruin in only 12.

# BERLIN 1945





# PACIFIC THEATRE

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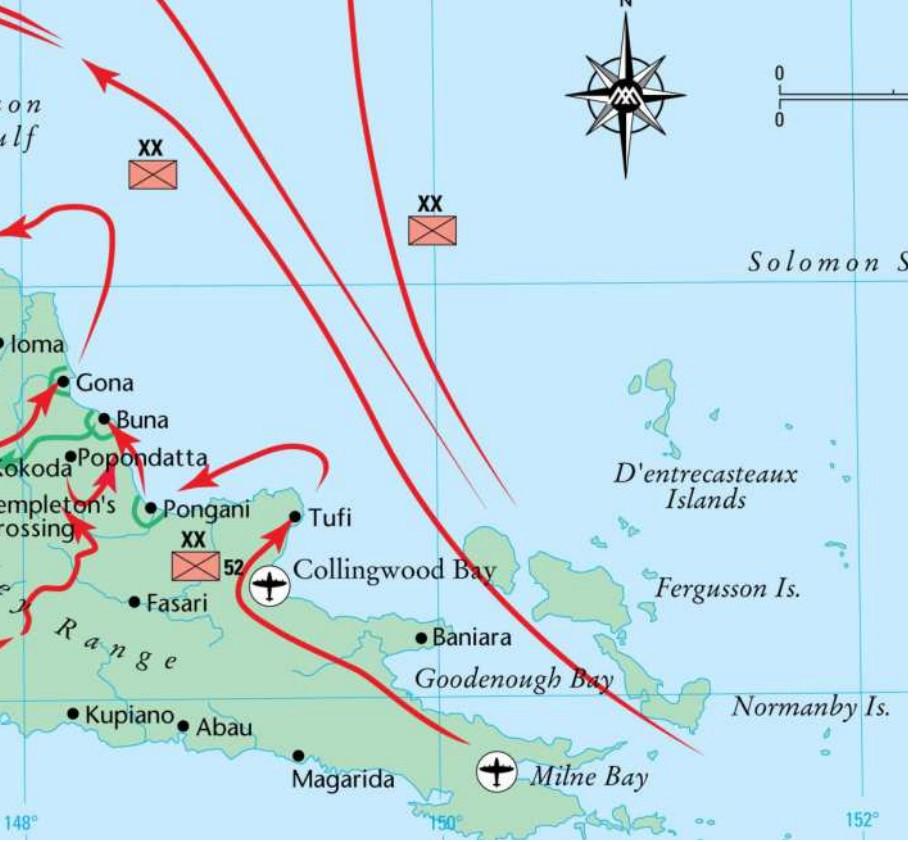
Coral Sea

146°

80



74



HAWAII, DECEMBER 1941



HAWAII, DECEMBER 1941

# PEARL HARBOR

Imperial planning and preparation for the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor began months before the Sunday morning aerial assault

WORDS MIKE HASKEW



**J**ust before sunrise on Sunday 7 December 1941, six aircraft carriers of the Imperial Japanese Navy's First Air Fleet under the command of Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, turned into the wind, ready to launch a powerful striking force of 353 aircraft.

Nagumo's flagship, Akagi, and her consorts, Kaga, Soryu, Hiryu, Shokaku and Zuikaku, set in motion the marauding strike force that would plunge the Pacific into World War II. Its target was the US Navy's Pacific Fleet, which was anchored at Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu in the territory of Hawaii. Other US Navy and Army installations on the island, Hickam Field, Wheeler Field, Bellows Field, Ewa Marine Corps Air Station, and the naval air stations at Kaneohe and on Ford Island in the heart of Pearl Harbor were to be hit as well.

The opening blow was intended to cripple the American military presence in the Pacific; allow the Japanese armed forces to seize and consolidate strategic gains throughout the region; and bring the US government to the negotiating table where Japan would dictate favourable terms of an armistice. To that end, the Pearl Harbor raid was co-ordinated with attacks on the Philippines, Wake Island, Midway Atoll and Malaya.

The gambit was all or nothing for Japan. Although senior Japanese commanders were confident of swift victory, at least some of them acknowledged that a prolonged war with the United States was a daunting prospect, considering the industrial might and resources at the disposal of their adversary. Years of rising militarism and imperialism in Japan had placed the island nation on a collision course with the United States, a preeminent power in the Pacific since the Spanish-American War. Japan's provocative military moves on the Asian mainland, particularly the occupation of the Chinese region of Manchuria and later of French Indochina, had brought the two nations to loggerheads. While negotiations were continuing, most observers on either side of the Pacific believed war was inevitable.

At 9pm on the evening prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, Nagumo ordered all hands aboard the Akagi to attention. He solemnly read a message from Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet. "The rise or fall of the empire depends on this battle. Everyone will do his duty to the utmost."

Yamamoto meant the communication not only as an encouragement to the Japanese sailors and airmen, but also as homage to naval esprit de corps. During the decades preceding World War II, the Imperial Japanese Navy had embarked on a lengthy program of expansion, modernising and modelling itself on the finest naval tradition in the world – the British Royal Navy. The message from Yamamoto echoed one similarly flashed by Admiral Horatio Nelson,

one of the greatest heroes in the history of the Royal Navy, prior to the epic battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

Japanese respect for the Royal Navy ran deep. Since the turn of the 20th century, some vessels of the imperial fleet had actually been constructed in British and French shipyards, while Japanese training, operational standards, uniforms and rank insignia were similar to those of the British.

Following the outbreak of war in Europe, the Royal Navy again served as a role model for the Japanese. On the night of 11 November 1940, Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers of the Fleet Air Arm flew from the deck of the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious in the Mediterranean Sea and attacked the Italian naval anchorage at Taranto. The 21 obsolescent British biplanes sank one Italian battleship and damaged two others.

For the Japanese, the idea of a preemptive raid on Pearl Harbor had been discussed, tested during war games and shelved several times during the years between the world wars. However, bolstered by the British success, the staff of the Combined Fleet began, with renewed purpose in January 1941, to plan for just such a bold stroke. Lieutenant Commander Minoru Genda, one of the best known and

most respected aviators in the Japanese armed forces, had observed American carriers operating in a unified, single strike force and attended war games in 1936, during which an offensive scenario against Pearl Harbor had ended in simulated disaster for the attacker. Still, Genda remained one of a relative few Japanese officers who believed it was possible for a carrier task force to successfully deliver a stunning blow against an enemy fleet at anchor.

As Japanese aircraft carrier strength reached sufficient levels to support a Pearl Harbor attack, Yamamoto instructed Admiral Takajiro Onishi, chief of staff of the Eleventh Air Fleet, to order Genda to evaluate the potential for success with, "...special attention to the feasibility of the operation, method of execution and the forces to be used." Yamamoto was reluctant to go to war with the US, however, he strongly believed that a substantial and successful first strike at the Pacific Fleet was the only option to bring such a conflict to a rapid and favourable conclusion for Japan.

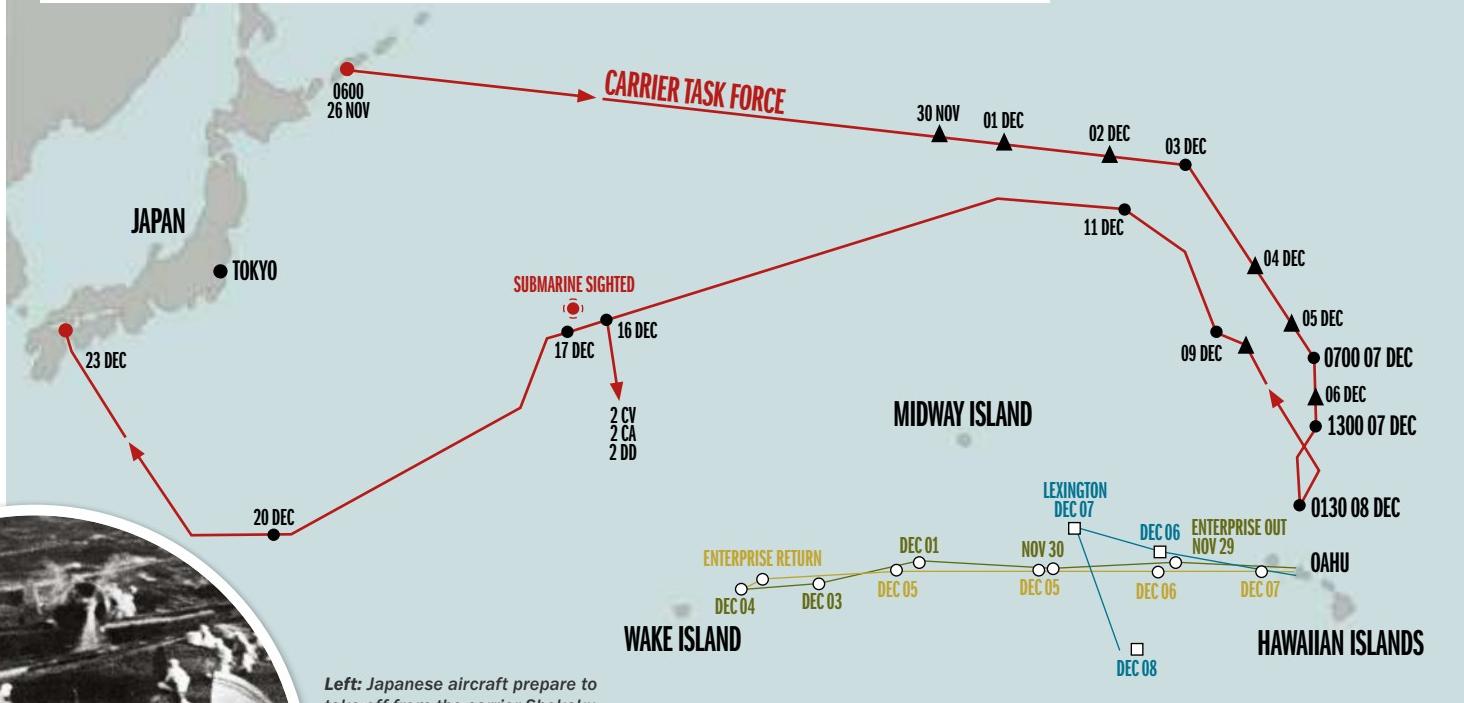
Yamamoto's assertion that Pearl Harbor should be Japan's target actually reversed traditional thinking at the highest command levels within the Imperial Navy. Although the army had been active on the Asian continent,

naval doctrine had previously assumed a defensive posture. In the autumn of 1940, Yamamoto's assertion became an ultimatum. He eventually threatened to resign if senior commanders within the Combined Fleet refused to support the proposal.

By the following August, the basic plan for the Pearl Harbor attack had been approved. The six aircraft carriers of the First Air Fleet were to be accompanied by two battleships, two heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, nine destroyers, three submarines and eight tankers – a total of 31 vessels – sailing from their rendezvous point at Hitokappu Bay in the Kurile Islands. The fleet was to sail on 26 November; take a northerly course, in order to avoid the busy Pacific trade routes and merchant shipping that plied the ocean; maintain strict radio silence; and launch its aircraft in two waves from a position 370 kilometres north of Oahu. The tentative date for the attack was designated as 7 December 1941. A cordon of fleet submarines was positioned around Oahu to provide early warning of American ship movements and attack any US Navy vessels that might be at sea near the harbour. Five mini submarines were to be launched from their mother submarines hours before the aerial attack, with the hope

## JAPANESE RAIDER ROUTE

The six Imperial Japanese Navy aircraft carriers and their escorting ships of the First Air Fleet departed the friendly waters of the Kurile Islands on 26 November 1941, sailing a northern route well away from standard merchant shipping lanes and maintaining strict radio silence. Rough seas and intermittent heavy rain cloaked the warships at times as they turned south east towards a point 370 kilometres north of Oahu to launch the aerial strike force that devastated Pearl Harbor on 7 December.



that they might infiltrate Pearl Harbor and launch torpedoes at anchored vessels of the Pacific Fleet.

Early in September, senior Japanese officers convened at the Naval War College in Tokyo and finalised the plans for the attack. One month later, senior pilots who would assume command of air groups were informed of the target against which they had been training so rigorously. They already had some idea of its nature, since the torpedo groups had worked to perfect their runs against capital ships anchored in shallow waters.

Combined Fleet Top Secret Operational Order No 1 was issued on 5 November, followed 48 hours later by Order No 2, authorising the fleet to weigh anchor at the end of the month and to execute the attack on Pearl Harbor.

When the fleet set sail, Admiral Kichisaburo Nomura and Special Envoy Saburo Kurusu were in Washington, DC, conducting last-ditch negotiations with Secretary of State Cordell Hull and President Franklin D Roosevelt.



## NAVAL AIR JUGGERNAUT

The Imperial Japanese Navy observed Western advances in naval aviation and welcomed military envoys to consult and train its pilots

The British Royal Navy pioneered many aspects of the development of naval aviation in the early 20th century and Japanese naval observers also recognised its potential.

Intent on emulating the Royal Navy's successes, the Japanese received a British mission headed by Captain William Sempill in the autumn of 1921. Sempill led 29 air operations instructors charged with assisting the development of the Japanese naval aviation program. By 1922, the Japanese had also constructed the Hosho, the world's first aircraft carrier purpose-built, rather than converted from

another ship type.

Sempill, who was later exposed as a spy for the Japanese, hoped to secure substantial sales of British arms to Japan in exchange for valuable expertise and advice. His team brought the blueprints of the most advanced British carrier designs, protocols involving elements such as pilot training; the launch and recovery of aircraft; refuelling and maintenance; and airborne operations. The British trained the young Japanese pilots in the latest Royal Navy aircraft, such as the Gloster Sparrowhawk fighter, along with torpedo

bombers and dive bombers. They introduced torpedo tactics to the Imperial Navy as well. Japanese engineers and designers experimented with their own ordnance and aircraft, several of which were patterned after British types, and perfected carrier operations and doctrine during the 1920s and 1930s.

Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Lieutenant Commander Takeshi Naito, a naval attaché in Berlin, travelled to the port of Taranto, Italy, where the British had executed a successful attack against the Italian Fleet at anchor in November 1940. With the assistance of the Italian Navy, Naito assessed the dynamics of the Taranto raid and advised the Pearl Harbor planners on modifications to existing tactics. Eventually, wooden stabilising fins were attached to Japanese aerial torpedoes, allowing them to run true in Pearl Harbor's shallow waters.



Dive bombers crowd a flight deck prior to Pearl Harbor

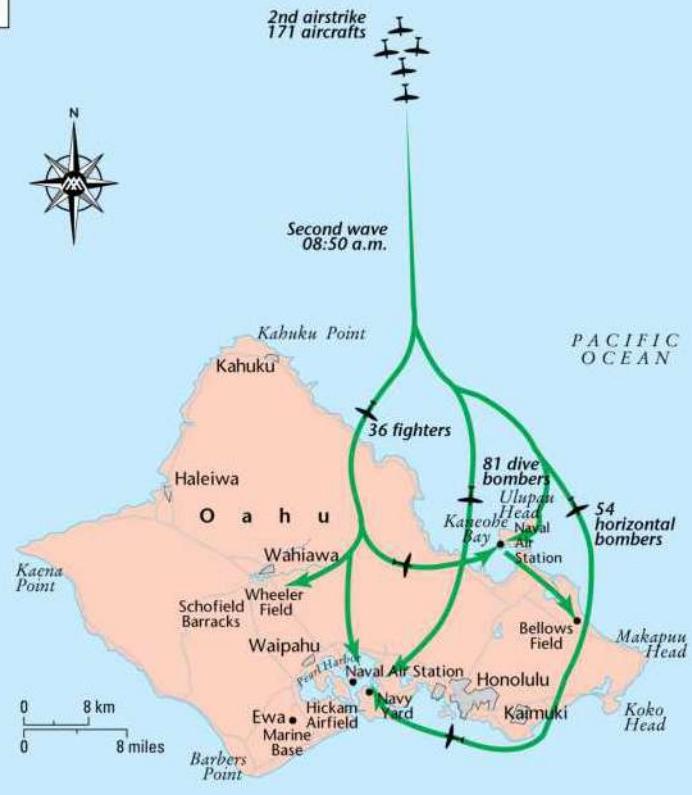
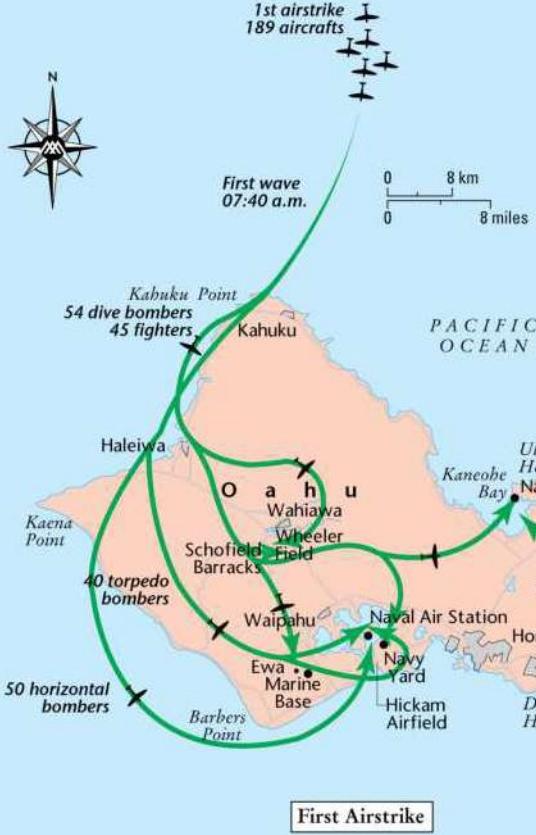
*Below:* Type 91 Kai 2 torpedoes on the flight deck of the Imperial Japanese Navy aircraft carrier, Akagi. The carrier is at Hitokappu Bay in the Kuriles just prior to departing for the attack on Pearl Harbor



**"SEMPILL, WHO WAS LATER EXPOSED AS A SPY FOR THE JAPANESE, HOPED TO SECURE SUBSTANTIAL SALES OF BRITISH ARMS TO JAPAN"**

Hawaii Operation  
26 November – 23 December 1941

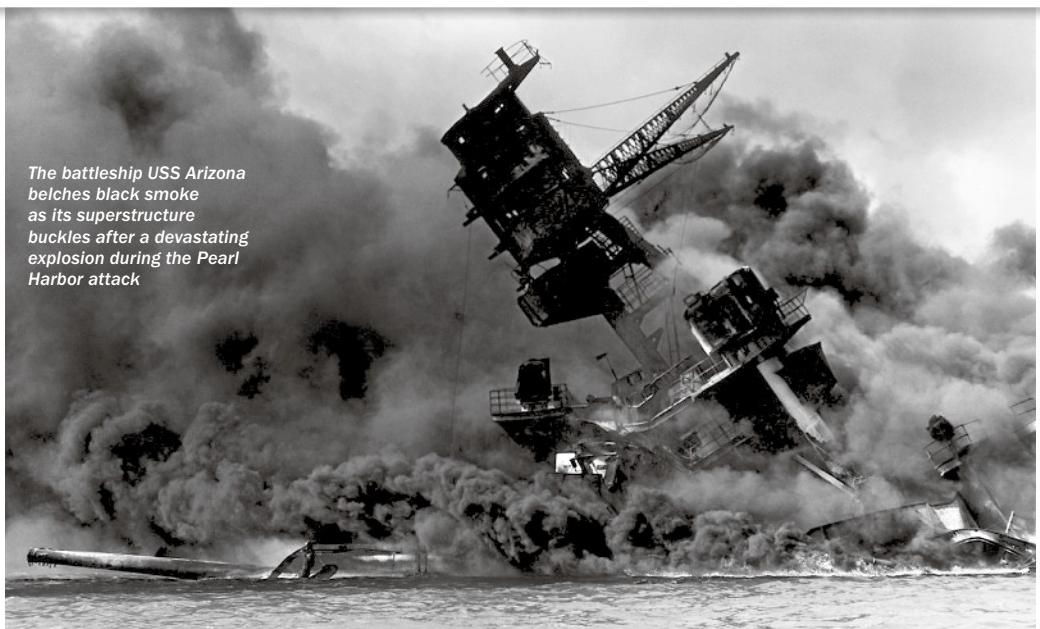
→ Route of Japanese aircraft



These negotiations were expected to fail, and when the impasse was reached, specific orders to launch the attack would be issued to Nagumo at sea. At the same time, the envoys, oblivious to the details of the Pearl Harbor attack, were instructed to deliver a message to the US government, officially terminating the negotiations. The government in Tokyo considered this diplomatic step essentially a declaration of war, timed for a half hour before the Japanese aircraft appeared in the sky above Pearl Harbor.

Lieutenant Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, leader of the air groups of the First Air Fleet, was assigned the task of allocating aircraft to specific targets, organising the two waves of planes to co-ordinate their attacks and allotting fighter protection against any defending American planes that might make it into the sky to give battle. Fuchida assigned 185 aircraft to the first wave. It consisted of 49 Nakajima B5N 'Kate' bombers carrying armour-piercing bombs, 40 Kates with aerial torpedoes, 51 Aichi D3A 'Val' dive bombers with general-purpose bombs and 45 superb Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighters to provide escort and strafe targets of opportunity.

While the Kates hit the warships anchored in Pearl Harbor, 25 Vals were designated to blast the primary American fighter base at Wheeler Field. 17 Vals were assigned to destroy Ford Island's patrol plane and fighter base and nine were to strike American bombers based at Hickam Field. The second wave included 54 Kates armed with 550 and 125-pound bombs to demolish installations and crater runways at the airfields, 80 Vals with 550-pound bombs



to renew the attacks on the warships in the harbour and 36 marauding Zeroes.

Fuchida received an intelligence message from a Japanese spy on Oahu the day before the attack. It was tinged both with optimism that the element of surprise would be achieved and disappointment that the three American aircraft carriers, Enterprise, Lexington and Saratoga were not present at the anchorage. It read, "No balloons, no torpedo defence nets deployed around battleships in Pearl Harbor. All battleships are in. No indications from enemy radio activity that ocean patrol flights being made in Hawaiian area. Lexington left harbour yesterday. Enterprise also thought to be

operating at sea."

The Saratoga was steaming into the harbour at San Diego, California when the Japanese attackers arrived above Pearl Harbor on 7 December. Although the aircraft carriers were absent, there was no turning back. The attack had to proceed as ordered and the Japanese rationalised that the remaining targets, particularly the US battleships, were high value enough to justify the risk being undertaken.

As the sky was still dark over the deck of the Akagi, pitched in rough seas, a green lamp was waved in a circle and the first Zero fighter roared down the flight deck into the air. Within 15 minutes, the entire first wave was airborne.

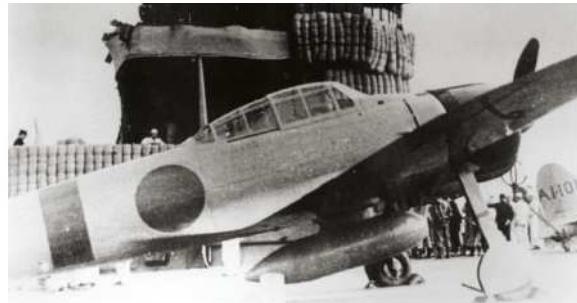
Photographed ten days after it crashed during the Pearl Harbor attack, the Zero of Petty Officer Shigenori Nishikaichi lies derelict



*Below: A Japanese Mitsubishi Zero fighter roars off the flight deck of the aircraft carrier Akagi en route to Pearl Harbor*



*After a mission in the Solomon Islands, Aichi D3A Val dive bombers return to the aircraft carrier Shokaku*



At 7.40am, the north shore of Oahu came into view. Fuchida was exultant. He radioed "Tora! Tora! Tora!" to the anxious Nagumo, signifying that complete surprise had been achieved. For several hours, the attackers wrought devastation on their targets below.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, Japanese forces moved aggressively in concert with the Pearl Harbor attack, reaching for objectives that would minimise US interference with coming operations to seize the Dutch East Indies, secure vital resources such as oil and rubber for their war machine and extend their defensive perimeter further into the expanse of the great ocean.

As the attack got underway in Hawaii, word was flashed to Midway Atoll at 6.30am local time on 7 December. The Marine garrison went on high alert and by dusk, the Japanese had arrived. Two Imperial Navy destroyers, the Akebono and Ushio, were sighted as they prepared to shell the installations on Midway.

War came to the atoll at 9.35pm, as Japanese 13-centimetre shells crashed on Sand and Eastern Islands, the two spits of land that, within months, would become the epicentre of World War II in the Pacific. As the destroyers cruised back and forth, the Marine guns responded with seven and 13-centimetre rounds. Japanese shells set the large seaplane hangar ablaze. One enemy round scored a direct hit on the concrete structure that housed the Sand Island power plant, smashing through an air intake and mortally wounding a young Marine officer, 1st Lieutenant George H Cannon, who refused to leave his post for medical treatment and later received a posthumous Medal of Honor.

The Midway battle lasted for about half an hour and Marine gunners claimed to have scored hits on at least one enemy destroyer, which was seen belching smoke and flame. When the Japanese finally withdrew, four Americans were

dead and 10 wounded. 36 Japanese bombers hit Wake Island on the morning of 8 December (across the International Date Line), destroying a dozen Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters on the ground. Meanwhile, Japanese troops landed at Kota Bharu on the coast of Malaya while the Pearl Harbor attack force was in the air. Within hours of the strike against Pearl, Japanese bombers hit Clark Field and other installations in the Philippines, catching American planes on the ground again.

Shocked and bloodied, the United States was suddenly at war. For a time, Japanese domination of the Pacific was virtually uncontested, but just as Yamamoto feared, a protracted conflict, one that Japan could not win, emerged. Even as Allied forces turned the tide and fought their way inexorably to Tokyo Bay and victory in 1945, the spectre of Pearl Harbor haunted the Americans.

While conspiracy theories have surfaced in the three-quarters of a century since the 'Day of Infamy', these remain the topic of heated debate and conjecture. Some revisionist historians have reviewed all the proof they need to conclude that President Roosevelt and other high-ranking Allied civilian leaders and military officers – even British Prime Minister Winston Churchill – were aware that the attacks on Pearl Harbor and other locations were coming. However, the 'case' will probably never be closed.

On the tactical level, the Americans received several warnings of the Japanese air armada approaching Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 – an encounter with a mini submarine and a radar sighting at Opana above Kahuku Point on the north shore, for instance. An open question remains as to whether American commanders in Hawaii should have taken action to improve preparedness and should have been more responsive to the signs of imminent attack on that fateful Sunday morning.

## A DAY OF INFAMY

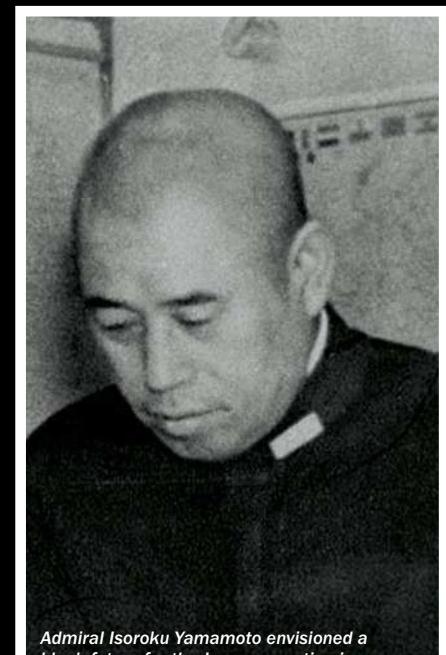
Despite the success of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Admiral Yamamoto correctly surmised that it was incomplete

As soon as Lieutenant Commander Mitsuo Fuchida was back aboard the Akagi, the leader of the Pearl Harbor strike reported to Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo on the carrier's bridge. Fuchida is said to have begged his commander to launch another attack.

Nagumo declined. The risk was too great and so he ordered the First Air Fleet to retire. When news of the successful attack reached Tokyo, citizens took to the streets in celebration. The highest echelons of the military exuded optimism.

However, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, architect of the raid, brooded. The American carriers had not been destroyed. Retribution would soon come. He had once warned fellow officers, "If I am told to fight regardless of the consequences, I shall run wild for the first six months or a year but I have utterly no confidence for the second or third year."

Pearl Harbor had been a tremendous tactical victory. The US Pacific Fleet was crippled but Yamamoto's words proved prophetic. Machine shops, repair facilities and stockpiles of fuel and oil were untouched. The submarine base was operational. The Americans recovered rapidly and just six months after Pearl Harbor, four of the Japanese carriers that had executed the raid were sunk by American planes at the Battle of Midway.



*Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto envisioned a bleak future for the Japanese nation in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack*



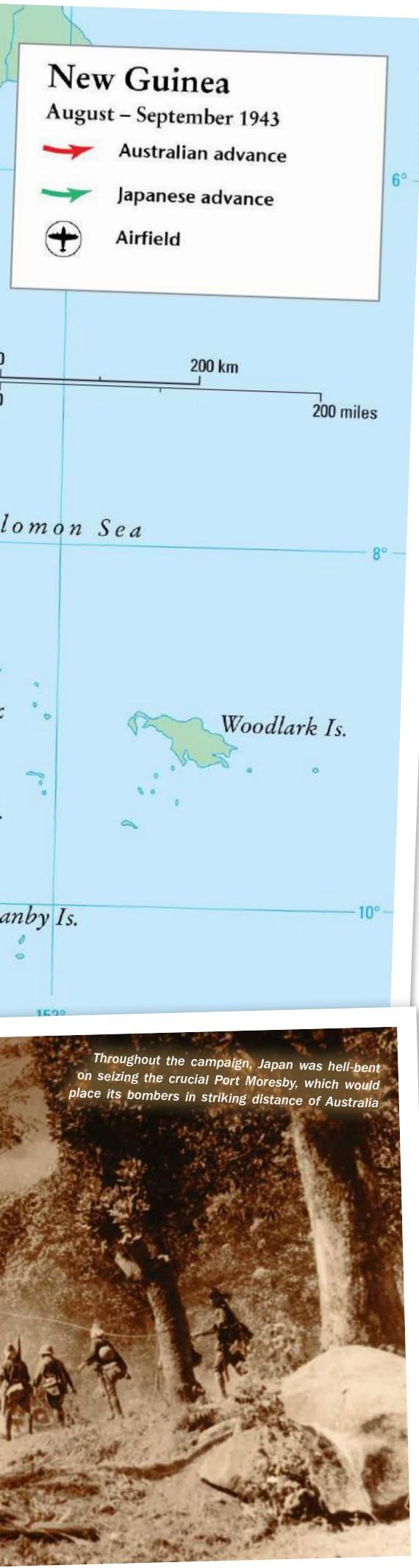
**NEW GUINEA, JANUARY 1942 - AUGUST 1945**

# THE NEW GUINEA CAMPAIGN

An unsung battlefield in the Pacific Theatre, Imperial Japan's failure to take New Guinea spelled doom for its larger war effort

WORDS HARETH AL BUSTANI





**A**fter bringing themselves, and the US, into World War II with the shock attack on Pearl Harbor, Imperial Japan launched a breakneck race across the southwest Pacific, taking the East Indies and the Philippines, before landing at New Guinea in January 1942.

Carving out an empire across the Western Pacific and Southeast Asia, Japan was desperate to rapidly isolate Australia – a powerful staging point with abundant land and natural harbours – from the fighting. To sever Australia's communication and supply lines, Japan would need to take New Guinea, 93 miles to the north. At the time, while the western half of the island was Dutch New Guinea, the northeast New Guinea and southeast Papua were administered by Australia. Although the island remained largely undeveloped, if Japan could seize the airfields along its southern coast, especially the Allied-held Port Moresby, its bombers would be within striking range of Australia itself.

With Australia's outposts on the island manned by volunteer militia and support troops – and the US months away from being able to ship troops to the Pacific – the iron was hot. The Imperial Army first seized the strategic city of Rabaul – a strategic location overlooking Simpson Harbor, on the northeast tip of New Britain Island – and rapidly began building a massive air and naval base, before going on to take Lae and Salamaua, on the coast of the Papua itself. In April, they began their occupation of Tulagi, marking the start of a lengthy campaign for dominance over the main island.

The next month, they launched Operation Mo, a formal effort to take Port Moresby. Japan sent a fleet of ships out to the Coral Sea, where they and the Allies clashed in the first naval battle ever fought exclusively by aircraft and

submarines – and the surface ships never came into direct contact with one another.

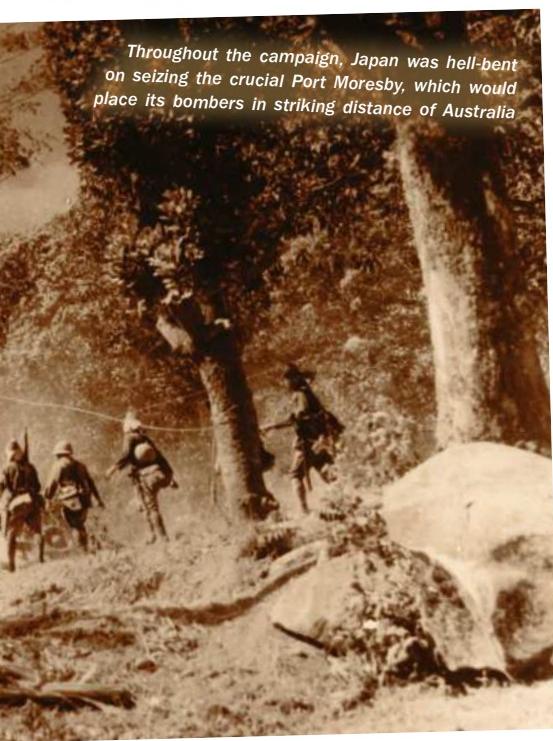
Despite losing the USS Lexington carrier, the Americans sank a light Japanese carrier and damaged two ships involved in Pearl Harbor – taking them out of the critical upcoming Battle of Midway. The battle also denied Japan's attempt to take Port Moresby by sea, prompting it to shift tactics and launch a ground invasion, with a force of nine infantry battalions.

The second-largest island in the world, New Guinea spans 312,170 square miles, with 10,000 square miles of mangrove forest swallowing its coastline. Throughout the war, it proved an unforgiving landscape, with mountain ranges rising 16,000 feet high, overflowing with impenetrable forests, violent rivers and muddy swamps. With 300 inches of rain every year, one veteran remarked, "It rains daily for nine months and then the monsoon starts."

Hot and humid, the island was also riddled with diseases: malaria, dengue fever, dysentery and scrub typhus, as well as poisonous snakes and venomous insects. There was very little infrastructure in place; no roads or railways, and supply lines followed ancient dirt tracks, trampled out by locals, often wading through calf-deep mud, which sucked the boots off any who dared to pass through.

Lugging 60 pounds of equipment through hot and humid weather was exhausting. Those who didn't die in the fighting were often killed by the elements – with some particularly unfortunate souls succumbing to infections and maggots. Hacking away at endless foliage with a machete, the hellish conditions even drove some of the soldiers mad, with one American describing it as "a green hell on earth".

On August 22, Japanese troops poured into the Owen Stanley mountains, an impenetrably





*In 1944, the joint air-naval offensive, Operation Cartwheel, culminated in the encirclement of the Japanese base at Rabaul*



dense jungle landscape, considered impassable by the Australians. Led by Major General Tomitoro Horii, they discovered the indigenous Kokoda Track, painstakingly following it towards their much-sought Port Moresby – committing massacres against civilians along the way.

Five days later, 2,000 Japanese amphibious forces sailed for Milne Bay, where the Allies had 9,500 soldiers. Outnumbered and unable to see the Australians shrouded in mist, the Japanese were at a major disadvantage. One of the groups that had set sail with roughly 1,500 men to Goodenough Island ended up stranded when 12 Australian P-40 strafers wiped out their barges and equipment.

Undeterred, and supported by two tanks, the main Japanese thrust pressed west from its landing area, pushing the Allies back. When they charged the defences on 31 August, they suffered huge losses to machine guns, aerial attacks and artillery fire. The next morning, Australian Major General Cyril Clowes launched a counterattack. Suffering from disease and exhaustion, the Japanese were forced to retreat – evacuating from their original landing areas, with 1,500 fewer men than they arrived with, having killed just 181 Allies.

During the counterattack, Australian troops stumbled upon the remains of several comrades who had been tied to trees and bayoneted, with signs tacked to their bodies: "It took them a long time to die." Yet, rather than demoralise them, this only inspired them to fight more ferociously.

Meanwhile, the Japanese ground force continued to push down the Kokoda Trail, and in September descended from the mountains towards Port Morseby, on the southern coast of Papua. Mired down in ferocious fighting, they faced stiff resistance from the Allies, who

had established air superiority. Held 30 miles from their target, the Japanese soon found themselves on the defensive, pushed back north along the Kokoda Trail.

Embarking on a chaotic retreat, General Horii was swallowed by the Kumusi River and drowned. The further they withdrew, the worse things got, with some starving soldiers supposedly eventually resorting to cannibalising their comrades' bodies. In November, they were back at Buna – the site of one of their worst atrocities – by which time, the Americans had invaded Guadalcanal, creating a huge drain on resources.

On 16 November, Lt Gen Hatazo Adachi took charge of New Guinea, arriving in the stronghold of Rabaul – sending reinforcements to the starving troops of Buna, swelling the numbers to 6,500 – digging in and holding off an Allied victory for two months. However, in January 1943, the Japanese had been ejected from Papua at great cost: 13,000 lives. The Allies too had suffered, losing 8,500, but had the strategic airstrip at Buna to show for it. As the Americans withdrew to recover for their next operation, the Australians, who had lost 5,698 men, were left in charge.

The Japanese tried once again to take Port Moresby, initially outnumbering the Australians and reaching within hundreds of yards of the airstrip. However, when the weather cleared, the Allies flew in troops and beat them back. In March, the Imperial Army tried to move 8,000 from Rabaul to Lae in the northeast but was attacked. The ensuing Battle of the Bismarck Sea was a colossal blow to the Imperial Army, who lost eight transports and four destroyers, dragging 3,000 Japanese soldiers to their watery deaths – with the Allies losing just four planes. General Douglas MacArthur described the battle as "the decisive aerial engagement" in the region,

*At the Battle of the Coral Sea, despite losing the USS Lexington, pictured, the Allies repelled Japan from Port Moresby*



and "one of the most complete and annihilating combats of all time".

After the battle, Japan stopped supplying its exhausted and desperate troops with large, exposed naval convoys, instead opting to send air transports, submarines, small motor vessels and barges. However, the Allied aerial superiority wrought devastation to these all along the coasts. By the end of the year, the Allies had essentially blockaded New Guinea.



After a critical attack on Rabaul itself, where scores of Japanese naval aviators were shot down, the Allies launched Operation Cartwheel – a combined land and sea attack, led by General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral William Halsey, aimed at finally removing the Japanese from the island by March 1944.

As MacArthur's land troops took Lae and the island of Saidor, on New Guinea's western tip, Halsey's naval forces swung around

## THE “FUZZY WUZZY ANGELS”

With courage and compassion, New Guinea's local populace played a crucial role in the Allied victory

At the outbreak of World War II, New Guinea was under an Australian administration that treated the 1.5 million indigenous New Guineans as colonial subjects – with up to 37,000 locals working throughout the war in forced labour. To make matters worse, when the Imperial Japanese forces arrived, they often murdered the local populace, forcing the men into slavery and stealing what little food they had.

During the vicious Kokoda Track fighting, the Australian forces suffered heavy casualties, and those who were captured could expect to be tortured to death. These troops were treated with remarkable compassion by the indigenous Papuans, who offered food and shelter, carrying them for miles to safety, at great risk, for no reward. For their generosity, the Australians began calling the locals “Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels”, celebrating their exploits in the press.

The New Guineans also risked and gave their lives to help the Australian coastwatchers – who gathered intelligence behind Japanese lines. The locals acted as their eyes and ears, carried their equipment and offered supplies.

Across Papua, New Guinea and New Britain, armed locals took part in successful guerrilla campaigns, coordinated by small Australian contingents. However, in some areas, one in four villagers could expect to lose their lives, and by the end of the war, most were united in a desire to see all oppressive outsiders simply pack up and leave.



the west of the Solomons, hoping to take the island of Bougainville – just 200 miles from Rabaul. General Hitoshi Imamura had reinforced Bougainville with 37,500 men, stationed on the south of the island, as well as several islets off its coast.

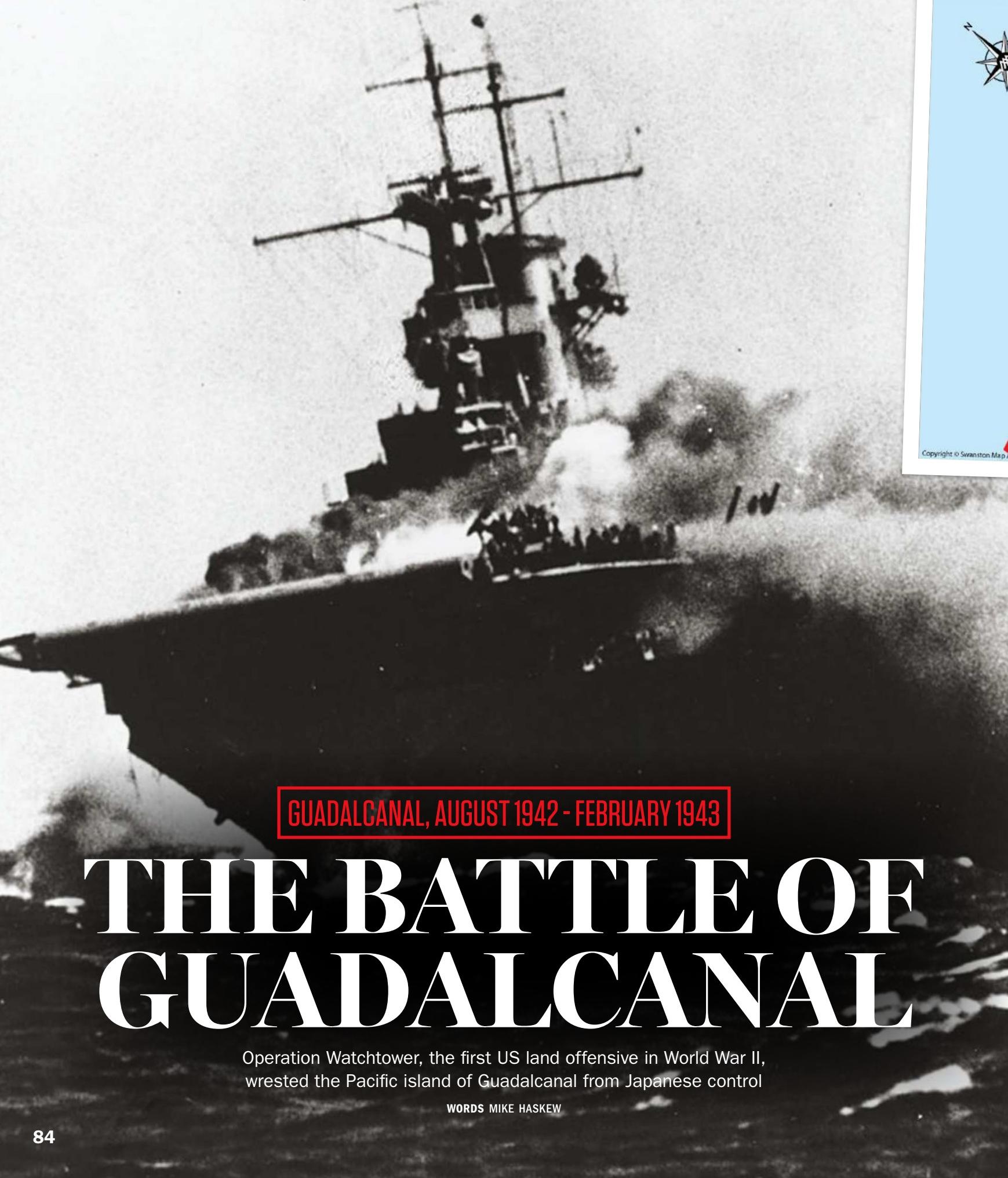
The US Marines landed on the north of Bougainville on 1 November 1943. As the Air Force bombarded the Japanese positions, its navy hit warships sat in the bay. These heavy attacks softened the Japanese for a US amphibious landing, allowing the Americans to establish a beachhead within weeks. Under heavy attack from waves of torpedo and dive-bombers, the Japanese fleet at Rabaul finally retreated to Tusk Island. By March 1944, successive Allied victories culminated in the encirclement and isolation of the 100,000 Japanese troops stationed at the base.

Sometimes compared to Hitler's disastrous failure to take Russia, a combination of the elements, supply chain breakdown and the loss of several key engagements doomed the Japanese mission to take New Guinea. While 15,000 Allies died during the conflict, more than 200,000 Japanese were killed – half of them succumbing to disease, infected wounds and starvation.

Japan continued pouring 600,000 troops into an increasingly costly quagmire. In the face of relentless assaults, the Imperial garrison refused to surrender, battling the Australians until the war ended in September 1945. Even then, 40,000 remained in hiding, desperately navigating the jungles of the main island, starving and diseased, swallowed by the swamps – often consuming the corpses of their comrades to stay alive, a harrowing experience giving rise to the proverb: “No one returns alive from New Guinea.”

GUADALCANAL, AUGUST 1942 - FEBRUARY 1943

The aircraft carrier USS *Wasp* burns furiously after being torpedoed by a Japanese submarine off Guadalcanal on 15 November 1942

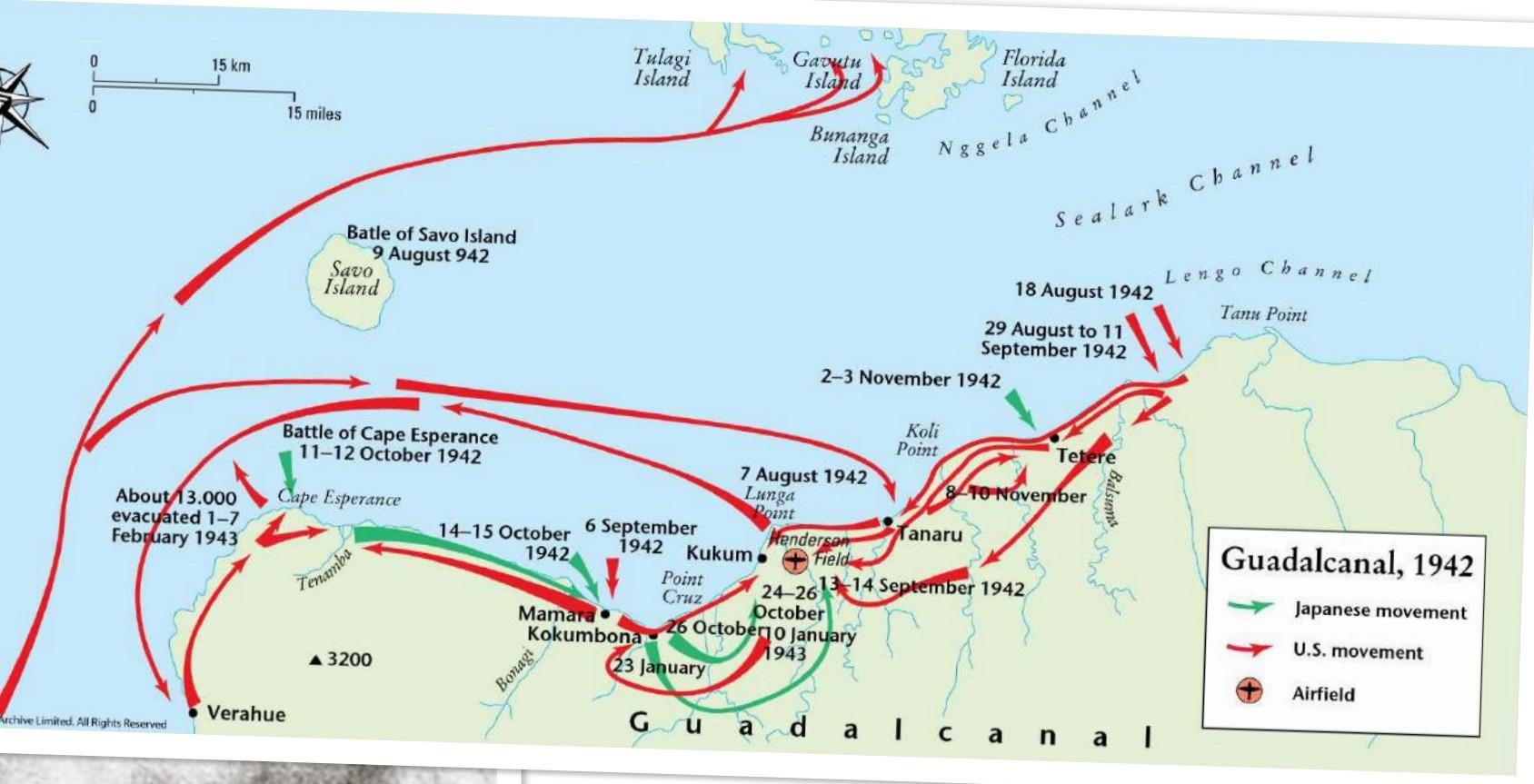


GUADALCANAL, AUGUST 1942 - FEBRUARY 1943

# THE BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL

Operation Watchtower, the first US land offensive in World War II, wrested the Pacific island of Guadalcanal from Japanese control

WORDS MIKE HASKEW



**B**y the summer of 1942, American and Allied forces in the Pacific Theatre of World War II were finally poised to assume the offensive. Operation Watchtower, the campaign to secure the southern Solomon Islands, was conceived to deter Japanese southward expansion that could threaten tenuous supply and communication lines stretching from the West Coast of the United States to remote Pacific bases, and finally to Australia.

Early in 1942, Japanese troops began constructing a seaplane base on the island of Tulagi and an airstrip at Lunga Point on Guadalcanal, 35 kilometres to the south across Sealark Channel. When these bases became operational, critical Allied installations would be within range of Japanese aircraft.

The only alternative for the Americans was to attack. Operation Watchtower, set for 7 August 1942, was designed to capture Guadalcanal, Tulagi, and the neighbouring islands of Tanambogo and Gavutu, and the task fell initially to the US 1st Marine Division, under General Alexander A Vandegrift. The division, 19,000 strong, was to receive logistical support from Task Force 61, under Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, while amphibious forces under Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner put the fighting men ashore, 11,000 of them on Guadalcanal. Admiral Robert L Ghormley, commander of US forces in the South Pacific Area, was responsible for the overall effort.

When the Marines splashed ashore at Tulagi, Tanambogo and Gavutu, heavy fighting ensued,

but the islands were secured within three days. At Guadalcanal, the Marines met virtually no resistance on the beaches. Surprisingly, they established a beachhead more than 1,800 metres long and 550 metres deep. On 8 August they secured the airfield.

It was the calm before the storm. During the next six months, fighting raged on Guadalcanal as well as the airspace and seas around the island. No fewer than seven naval battles, five of them nocturnal, took a heavy toll, earning Sealark Channel a new name – ‘Iron Bottom Sound’. Fighting in fetid jungles and swamps, Marines and US Army troops captured Guadalcanal the following February. The cost was high with 1,600 killed and 4,200 wounded. Japanese losses were catastrophic with more than 24,000 dead.

As soon as the Americans had taken the airstrip, they renamed it Henderson Field in honour of a Marine pilot killed in the recent Battle of Midway. Navy construction battalions (Seabees) completed the airstrip, making it operational for US planes. Control of Henderson Field became the linchpin of victory at Guadalcanal. The landings had taken the Japanese by surprise. Rather than launching an overwhelming counterattack on land, their response ashore was piecemeal, although air attacks and naval sorties threatened to thwart Operation Watchtower.

On the night of 8 August a Japanese naval task force sank the US cruisers Astoria, Vincennes and Quincy, and the Australian cruiser Canberra in the Battle of Savo Island. Fletcher began withdrawing his fleet. Many ships still had their

cargoes aboard, and the Marines were essentially marooned with only 17 days' rations. They scrounged food, conserved water and fought like lions.

A concerted Japanese effort to eject the Americans from Guadalcanal was not undertaken until mid-August, when the 28th Infantry Regiment, under Colonel Kiyonao Ichiki, made landfall. The impetuous Ichiki struck at American positions along the Ilu River, misidentified on Marine maps as the Tenaru, on the night of 21 August. The 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines absorbed the brunt of the assault, and American light tanks, artillery, machine-gun and rifle fire shredded clusters of enemy troops attempting to cross the river. After daylight, the Marines mopped up. 800 Japanese soldiers were dead, while 34 Marines were killed and 75 wounded. Distraught, Ichiki burned his regimental standard and committed suicide. Henderson Field was safe, but only temporarily.

The Japanese continued to deliver supplies and reinforcements via nocturnal runs down New Georgia Sound, nicknamed 'The Slot', and these fast convoys were soon dubbed the 'Tokyo Express' by the Americans. Meanwhile, US fighters and bombers, dubbed the 'Cactus Air Force', engaged in dogfights with enemy planes, interdicted Japanese bombing missions and strafed targets of opportunity, including enemy troop transports caught during daylight hours. Marine Major Joseph J Foss led the fighter pilots, becoming an ace and shooting down 23 Japanese aircraft in October and November. Still, the American grip on Henderson Field remained tenuous, and the Japanese were full of fight.

Marine Raiders and airborne troops moved from Tulagi to Guadalcanal in September, joining the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines defending a line facing west to protect Henderson Field. An all-out Japanese effort to break through and take the airfield was launched after dark on 12 September. Lieutenant Colonel Merritt A 'Red Mike' Edson led a desperate Marine defence against multiple enemy charges. In some places, fighting was hand-to-hand. Marine artillery was on time and accurate, blasting the Japanese, whose attacking waves finally receded. Afterwards, the area of sharpest fighting bore the name of 'Bloody Ridge' or 'Edson's Ridge' after the gallant commander. More than 800 Japanese troops died, and around 600 were wounded. Marine losses amounted to 59 killed and 200 wounded.

At sea, the struggle swirled. On 24 to 25 August, the Battle of the Eastern Solomons was fought to a bloody draw with the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise damaged. In early October, the Japanese landed reinforcements despite American interference during the nocturnal Battle of Cape Esperance. In the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands on 25 to 26 October, the aircraft carrier Hornet was lost, while Enterprise was damaged once again, but two Japanese carriers were damaged and their aircrews suffered terrible losses. In mid-November, a Japanese reinforcement mission was stopped during the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, but on the 15th the aircraft carrier USS Wasp was torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine. At the end of the month, the Japanese won a tactical victory at the Battle of Tassafaronga but again failed to put troops and supplies ashore on the island.



US 1st Marine Division storm the beaches of Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942



US control of the Henderson Field airstrip would prove vital to victory in Guadalcanal

● 7 AUGUST 1942  
OPERATION WATCHTOWER UNDERWAY  
1st Marine Division storm Guadalcanal against the Japanese opposition.

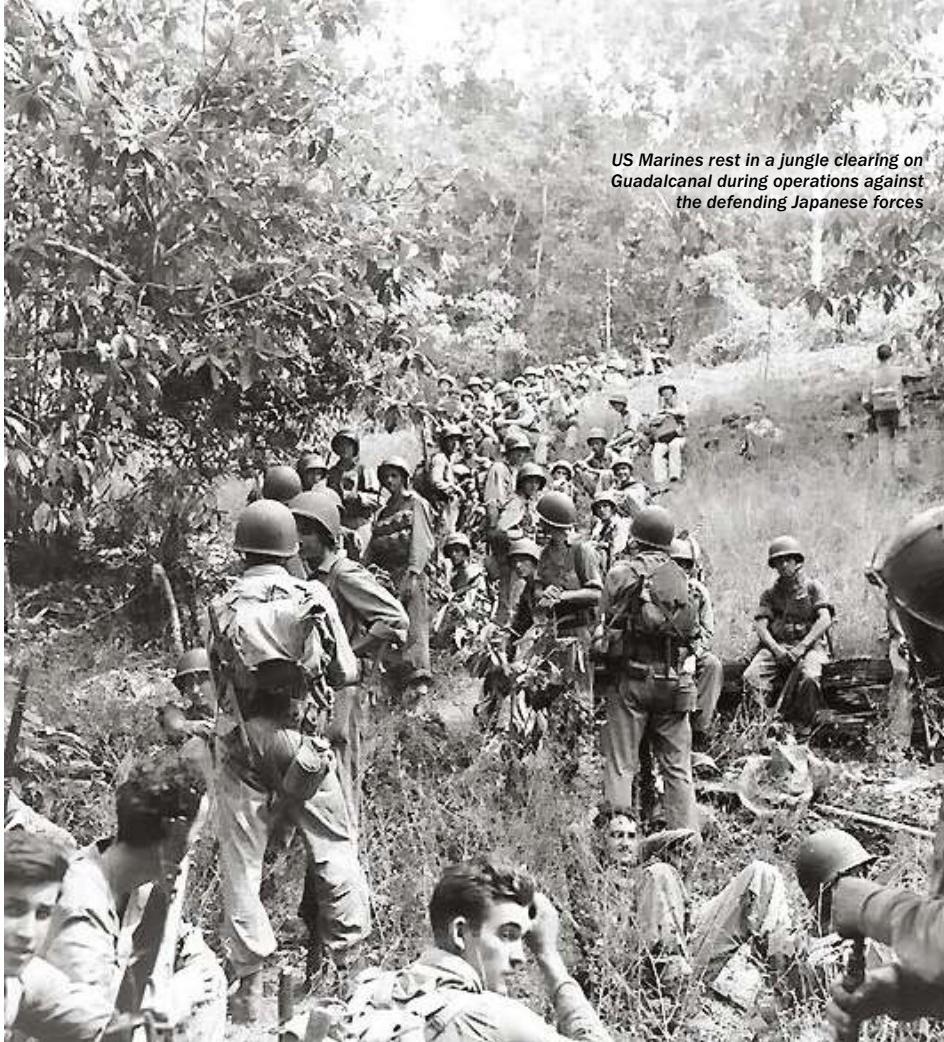
● 8 AUGUST 1942  
DISASTER AT SAVO ISLAND  
Japanese gunnery and torpedo tactics sink four Allied cruisers, prompting Admiral Fletcher to withdraw American naval forces off Guadalcanal.

● 21 AUGUST 1942  
ICHIKI DETACHMENT DECIMATED  
Marines along the Tenaru (Ilu) River annihilate the Japanese 28th Infantry Regiment, under Colonel Kiyonao Ichiki, as they vainly attempt to cross the stream and capture vital Henderson Field.

● 24 AUGUST 1942  
EASTERN SOLOMONS BATTLE  
In the naval Battle of the Eastern Solomons, both sides suffer losses to air attacks.

● 12 SEPTEMBER 1942  
BATTLE OF BLOODY RIDGE  
Marines under Lieutenant Colonel Merritt A 'Red Mike' Edson defend Henderson Field on Guadalcanal.

● 24 SEPTEMBER 1942  
AMERICAN FIGHTERS PROWL  
The Cactus Air Force, based at Henderson Field, shoot down 16 enemy aircraft. Marine Captain Marion E Carl claims three.



*US Marines rest in a jungle clearing on Guadalcanal during operations against the defending Japanese forces*



*Bombed and strafed by American aircraft, a Japanese transport ship lies beached at Tassafaronga Point on Guadalcanal*

Unable to establish complete control of the sea or air around Guadalcanal, Japanese senior commanders realised that their ability to contest the island was slipping away. They also understood that the fight had taken on a much greater significance than they had originally assigned it. In one last gamble for victory, they committed two full divisions to battle.

General Harukichi Hyakutake arrived on the island in early October, and a week later the Marines received reinforcements from the 23rd (American) Division of the US Army. Admiral Robert L Ghormley was relieved on 18 October, replaced with Admiral William F 'Bull' Halsey, a tough-minded commander intent on winning. Hyakutake continued his troop buildup and then hurled thousands against the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Lewis B 'Chesty' Puller, reinforced by the 164th Infantry Regiment, Americal Division, along the Matanikau River on 24 to 25 October. The Americans were hard-pressed. One battalion endured three fanatical Japanese charges on the second day, but the offensive blew itself out, gaining nothing at a cost of 3,500 dead. American casualties amounted to 300 killed and wounded.

In November, the Americans began clearing pockets of resistance along the Matanikau while holding their line against repeated enemy attacks. In December, the 1st Marine Division was finally withdrawn after four months in combat. Army Lieutenant General Alexander M Patch relieved the heroic Vandegrift, and his new command of 50,000 troops included the 2nd Marine Division, and the Army's Americal and 25th Infantry Divisions. At the end of the month, Patch initiated a decisive push. Enemy resistance began to noticeably wane by the end of January, and on 9 February 1943, Guadalcanal was declared secure.

The Japanese had sustained mounting losses in their reinforcement efforts and concluded that the necessary pace would be unsustainable. Many soldiers were suffering from disease and malnutrition. In mid-December, Imperial General Headquarters had decided to abandon the island, finally evacuating about 11,000 emaciated soldiers.

The American victory at Guadalcanal was a turning point in the Pacific War. From that time until their surrender in Tokyo Bay three years later, the Japanese were obliged to fight on the defensive against American forces.

- **11-12 OCTOBER 1942**  
BATTLE OF CAPE ESPERANCE  
Both sides lose a cruiser and a destroyer to naval gunfire.
- **18 OCTOBER 1942**  
HALSEY RELIEVES GHORMLEY  
Admiral Ghormley, believed too pessimistic to continue in overall command of Operation Watchtower, is relieved by Admiral William F 'Bull' Halsey, who energises the campaign.
- **24-25 OCTOBER 1942**  
CHESTY PULLER'S STAND  
Marine Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Puller exhorts his command, to stand firm against waves of attacking Japanese troops in a decisive engagement.
- **25-26 OCTOBER 1942**  
SANTA CRUZ ACTION  
The aircraft carrier USS Hornet sinks, while Enterprise is damaged. Supporting a Guadalcanal land offensive, the Japanese fail to control the seas, losing veteran aircrews.
- **25 DECEMBER 1942**  
PULLING THE PLUG  
Conceding that the battle for Guadalcanal is lost, senior Japanese officers gather at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo to finalise plans for troops withdrawal.
- **9 FEBRUARY 1943**  
FROM DOUBT TO VICTORY  
Operation Watchtower concludes as the island of Guadalcanal is pronounced secure by American forces.



IWO JIMA, FEBRUARY - MARCH 1945

# THE BATTLE OF IWO JIMA

After an arduous slog through the Pacific, US Marines mounted one final assault on Japanese forces in an attempt to unlock the mainland

WORDS JOSH BARNETT

**A**fter the decisive naval victory at the Battle of Midway in June 1942 (the first significant triumph in the Pacific for the Allies since Japan instigated the war at Pearl Harbor in December 1941), the US Navy was afforded some time to rebuild during 1943. Ships were in need of repair and refitting, seamen and ground troops required rest, and armaments needed replenishing.

It was during this lull that Chief of Command for the US's Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester W Nimitz, refocused the tactics employed against the Japanese in the Pacific. Rather than take on the enemy direct, a campaign of island-hopping was instigated. Imperial forces had become heavily entrenched on certain key islands, making them difficult and costly targets for the Allies to capture. Instead, Nimitz's plan was to skirt

around this nuclei, taking the less fortified islands in the Pacific as the US advanced towards the Japanese home islands.

The war was taking its toll on the Japanese as the US gained the upper hand in both the sea and the air. To make matters worse, Japanese cyphers were easily decoded by US intelligence, who kept Allied forces one step ahead of their enemy at all times. It was this advantage that led to the death of Marshal



Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto (Nimitz's opposite number) in April 1943.

After the Japanese defeat at Guadalcanal, Yamamoto decided to go on a moral-boosting inspection of the South Pacific. Word of the Japanese Commander in Chief's plans reached US Navy intelligence, leading President Franklin D Roosevelt to give the order: "Get Yamamoto". On the morning of 18 April 1943, the commander's plane was shot down by US forces, dealing an embarrassing blow to the Japanese Navy.

By April 1944, with momentum firmly on their side, US forces recaptured the Marshall Islands. Later the same year, it was the turn of the Mariana and Caroline Islands to fall into Allied hands, as plans for the invasion of Okinawa continued apace. The Japanese mainland was, metaphorically, in sight, with just one remaining target: Iwo Jima.

Located 1,200 kilometres south of Tokyo in the Volcanic Islands cluster, Iwo Jima was home to two Japanese airstrips (with a third under construction at the north end of the island). The US believed this small island, just 20 square kilometres in size, to be a strategic necessity for mainland attacks. If it could be captured, the island would be used as a vital base for escort fighters, as well as a landing patch for damaged B-29 bombers returning from the mainland.

The Japanese had also recognised the importance of Iwo Jima and, under the command of General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, began constructing numerous inland bunkers in the summer of 1944, a noted departure from the usual beach fortifications used by the Imperial Japanese forces. US aerial and submarine reconnaissance showed the supposed scale, with 642 pillboxes, blockhouses and other gun positions identified prior to the assault.

A summer-long barrage designed to incapacitate the staunch Japanese defences ensued. For 74 days straight, US bombers pummelled this tiny blot of volcanic rock, while in the 72 hours running up to the invasion, the US Navy peppered Iwo Jima with shells, shattering the peace of this once idyllic South Pacific island.

Codenamed 'Operation Detachment', the invasion proper began on 19 February 1945. The assault was tasked to the V Amphibious Marine Corps, led by General Holland 'Howlin'



*The US Navy Sixth Fleet photographed during the Battle of Iwo Jima*



## IWO JIMA, SOUTH PACIFIC 19 FEBRUARY - 26 MARCH 1945

WHO	WHAT	WHERE	WHY	OUTCOME
3rd, 4th and 5th US Marine Divisions battled against the Imperial Japanese Army's 109th Infantry.	The battle of Iwo Jima was an amphibious assault resulting in one of the bloodiest battles seen in the Pacific Theatre.	Iwo Jima, a small island in the South Pacific's Volcano Island chain, 885 kilometres off the Japanese mainland.	Capturing three airfields to be used for damaged B-29 bombers returning from mainland sorties.	It was the first time US casualties outnumbered their Japanese counterparts but the island was secured.

Mad' Smith, Commanding General for the expeditionary troops once ashore. H-Hour was set for 9am, with the initial wave of armoured amphibian tractors coming ashore at 9.02am followed, three minutes later, by the first troop-carrying vehicles.

Spilling down the ramps, the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions (led by Major General Clifton B Cates and Major General Keller E Rockey respectively) waded through the ankle-deep volcanic ash of Iwo Jima's southwestern shore unopposed. The pre-invasion bombardment appeared to have cleared the island. However, unknown to the US forces, Kuribayashi's 109th Infantry Division was holed up in a network of over 5,000 caves and 17 kilometres of tunnels around Iwo Jima, waiting for the landing force's shelling to cease before showing their resistance.

There were murmurs among the US troops that the Japanese forces had been wiped out as the beach remained eerily quiet – a marked departure from previous infantry battles in the Pacific where shorelines were staunchly defended. The landing plans tasked the 5th Division's 28th Regiment with taking Mount Suribachi, the 554-foot dormant

volcano at the island's southern-most tip, by the end of D-Day. Likewise, the 4th Division was scheduled to take Airfield 1 the same day. In the calm of the initial landing, both plans seemed achievable yet, as the leading battalions crested the terrace at the end of the beach, General Kuribayashi gave the order to take up weapons.

The unmistakable chatter of machine gun fire from hidden Japanese emplacements cut down the initial waves of US troops, as artillery and mortar fire now began to pound the beaches. The soft volcanic soil, churned by the pre-invasion barrage, proved difficult to move through at pace, slowing the US advance. To make matters worse, fortifications on Mount Suribachi (protected by reinforced steel doors) rained down shells on the troops below.

Despite landing some 30,000 men, progress was slow and, by the time the US advance was called to a halt at 6pm, the Marine line fell well short of their D-Day targets. Still, Mount Suribachi's northeastern side had been surrounded by the 28th Regiment. The 5th's 27th Regiment had been able to push towards

**"UNKNOWN TO THE US FORCES, KURIBAYASHI'S 109TH INFANTRY DIVISION WAS HOLED UP IN A NETWORK OF OVER 5,000 CAVES AND 17 KILOMETRES OF TUNNELS"**



Once the US Marines established a beachhead, the gradual grinding down of Japanese resistance began

the northwestern coastline but had taken heavy casualties in doing so, while the 4th Division skirted around Airfield 1's southern perimeter, securing a line towards the quarry near East Boat Basin.

During previous battles, Japanese banzai charges had caused considerable chaos throughout the night and, expecting similar attacks, US forces remained vigilant during darkness. General Kuribayashi did not believe in the usefulness of such tactics, though, feeling the banzai charge was a needless loss of life. This allowed the 3rd Battalion, 13th Marines (the artillery support for the 28th Regiment) to launch mortar and 105mm Howitzer shell attacks on Mount Suribachi during the evening of 19 February in preparation of an ascent the next morning.

Formulated by the 28th's leader, Colonel Harry B Liversedge, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions plunged forward at 8.30am on 20 February, with the 1st Battalion remaining in reserve. With regular gunfire proving useless against the Japanese emplacements, US troops turned to their trusty flamethrowers and grenades to flush defenders out of their foxholes. However, the Japanese (thanks to their comprehensive tunnel network) soon re-manned each supposedly clear pillbox. It would be a tactic that kept US forces fighting on all fronts across the island, keeping the Marines' progress to a minimum.

Just 200 yards of Mount Suribachi had been taken by 5pm on D+1. The following

day, Liversedge's Marines attacked again after a 40-plane airstrike. With all three battalions heaving forward on one front, and with effective support from tanks and artillery, the 28th Regiment surged to the foot of the mountain. With the naval support covering the western side, the Marines had Suribachi surrounded by 22 February.

Finally, a day later, after reconnaissance from 2nd Battalion, a 40-man combat patrol was sent to the summit upon the orders of Lieutenant Colonel Chandler W Johnson. Under the command of First Lieutenant Harold G Schrier, they stormed the summit, raising a small US flag while under intense fire from the remaining Japanese troops. Later that day, a larger flag would be raised in order to boost the morale of Marines across the island.

While the 28th Marine Regiment was still on Suribachi, the 26th and 27th Regiments of the 5th Division had pushed to Iwo Jima's western coast with suicidal rapidity, beginning their journey to the island's north sector on 20 February. Meanwhile, the 4th Division's 23rd, 24th and 25th Regiments had secured 'Motoyama 1', the southern-most airfield. With the 5th Division surging the Marine line forward by around 1,000 yards, only the 23rd Regiment (fighting on the 4th Division's left flank) could keep advancing at a similar pace.

Compared with the southern half of Iwo Jima, the northern sector was extremely well fortified, thanks to the efforts of Kuribayashi's men during that summer of 1944. The US

## OPPOSING FORCES



### US LEADER

General Holland Smith

### US INFANTRY

1 Amphibious Corps (3 US Marine Divisions)

### TANKS

c.150 M4A3 Sherman tanks (including 8 with the Mark 1 napalm flamethrower)

### US GAME CHANGERS

The sheer number of men (around 70,000) thrown into battle over the course of the 36-day invasion.



### JAPAN LEADER

General Tadamichi Kuribayashi

### JAPAN INFANTRY

1 Imperial Infantry Division

### TANKS

22 from Lieutenant Colonel Baron Takeichi Nishi's 26th Tank Regiment

### JAPAN GAME CHANGERS

17km of tunnels, 642 pillboxes and 5,000 caves dotted around the island, along with the Japanese Infantry's tenacious defence.



General Holland Smith



General Tadamichi Kuribayashi

Marines were finding the rocky terrain tough to negotiate, with every cleared pillbox and fortification soon reoccupied by Japanese forces, who were putting up a staunch and bloody resistance. Any gain was seemingly met with renewed fire from the shellproof artillery emplacements and well-hidden tanks.

To aid the 4th Division's charge, General Cates called the 21st Regiment of the 3rd Division ashore on 21 February. However, with Japanese forces pinning down the 25th Regiment on the eastern shores, the beach was congested, forcing the 3rd Division's relief through the centre of the Marine Corps line in place of the 23rd Regiment. By the morning of the 22nd, frontline units were beginning to be relieved, with the fresh Marine forces able to grind out short territorial gains. Yet, Kuribayashi's men were alert to the fresh threat, pinning down units that were about to be replaced.

On D+4, V Marine Corps' Major General Harry Schmidt came ashore to survey the damage, ordering an attack the following morning. 24 February dawned with tanks thrusting through towards the second airfield, supported by the 21st Regiment. The 5th Division's tanks flanked Motoyama 2's western edge, while the 4th Division armour edged forward on the airstrip's east perimeter. Aided by a 76-minute naval bombardment, the US Marines were advancing once again.

The same day, the remaining regiments of Major General Graves B Erskine's 3rd Division were committed to Iwo Jima. The veteran division was tasked with advancing through the supposedly flat centre line of the island, going head-on into Kuribayashi's main defensive line on 25 February. With flame-throwing tanks incinerating the enemy (and 50 per cent of the corps' artillery missions aiding the 3rd Division) three days of toil finally paid off on the evening of 27 February.

The Japanese line cracked, and the 9th Regiment found itself controlling two hills north of the second airfield, while the following day, the 21st Regiment stormed through the remnants of Motoyama village to seize two hills commanding over the unfinished airfield three. Elsewhere, the 5th Division had secured 'Hill 362A' after initial resistance from the Japanese proved deadly. 224 of the Division's Marines were killed or wounded on 1 March, but the hill's access to Nishi Ridge on the northwest edge of the island was too important to bypass.

While many hills had fallen with relative ease, Hill 382 on the eastern edge of the island was proving a more difficult proposition for the 4th Division. Honeycombed with Kuribayashi's tunnels, the hill's approach was guarded by hidden tanks, while the crest had been fortified into a huge artillery-proof bunker.

South of the hill was a series of ridges, topped by 'Turkey Knob', while further south of this massive rock was a natural bowl known as the 'Amphitheatre'. The fighting here was bloody, with 1 March the fourth day that the division's Marines had hurled themselves at the Japanese forces. Such was the relentless nature of this quadrant, it became known as the 'meat grinder'. It wasn't

# IWO JIMA

## 19 FEBRUARY - 26 MARCH 1945



**02** On 22 February, during the siege on Suribachi, the US support carrier, USS Bismarck Sea is sunk after being stung by a string of kamikaze attacks from Japanese planes. A day later, though, Marines raise the flag atop the mountain, with the moment immortalised on camera by Associated Press' Joe Rosenthal.



**"THE US MARINES WERE FINDING THE ROCKY TERRAIN TOUGH TO NEGOTIATE, WITH EVERY CLEARED PILLBOX AND FORTIFICATION SOON REOCCUPIED BY JAPANESE FORCES WHO WERE PUTTING UP A STAUNCH AND BLOODY RESISTANCE"**



*The original US flag raised on the top of Mount Suribachi once it had been taken*



until 10 March that the Japanese defenders around 'Turkey Knob' were eliminated. Naval fire, carrier air strikes, heavy shelling and many Marine lives were needed before Hill 382 finally fell into US hands.

In this time, the 5th Division's 26th Regiment had succeeded in securing 'Hill 362B' on 3 March, before the 3rd Division readied itself for the assault on 'Hill 362C' four days later. Under cover of darkness (a departure from the usual US tactics in the Pacific), General Erskine's men advanced beyond the unsuspecting Japanese forces. It was a blow for General Kuribayashi, yet his men remained to resist strongly in their lasting areas of occupation.

Unfortunately for Imperial Japan, their attacks were becoming increasingly uncoordinated, allowing patrols from the 3rd Marine Division to reach the northern coast by 9 March. The following evening, there was only one final pocket of Japanese resistance left in the division's sector, although the tunnels underneath the ground gave many more fanatical infantry a hiding place.

In the eastern sector, home of the 4th Division, Japanese troops launched a counterattack on 8 March. Under the cover of heavy artillery fire, the men attacked the Marine forces, worming their way through the 23rd and 24th Regiment's lines. Some attacked with the blood-curdling banzai cry, though many chose a stealthier approach, attempting to impersonate wounded US soldiers. Despite the counterattack's ingenuity, it was an ultimately hopeless effort that saw 650 Japanese killed by noon the following day. The end result was that, on 10 March, the Turkey Knob/Amphitheatre salient was completely destroyed as Marine forces pushed Kuribayashi's defences right back to the northern coast.

For the remainder of Operation Detachment, each Marine division would be faced with isolated pockets of resistance dotted around Iwo Jima island. The 3rd Division was tasked with the grim job of destroying a heavily fortified resistance southwest of Hill 362C (eventually achieved on 16 March), while the 4th Division focused on an enemy stronghold between East Boat Basin and Tachiiwa Point.

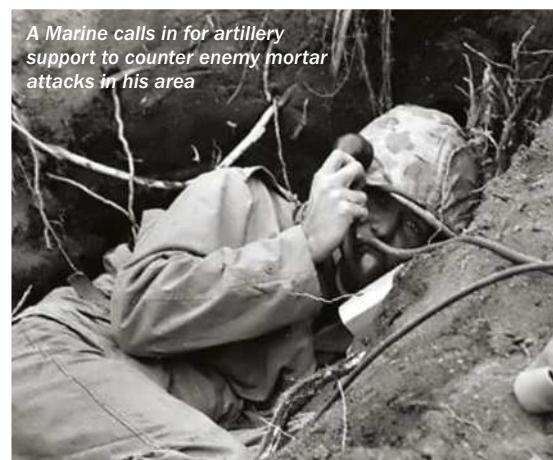
Across the island, 5th Division bore down on Japanese forces around Kitano Point, the last point of defence in the Iwo Jima campaign. Joined by two battalions of the 3rd Division's 21st Regiment, the final Marine drive began on 11 March with naval shelling and airstrikes. The US artillery again had little impact, though, making initial progress painstaking.

Despite being ravaged since the initial landing on 19 February, the 5th Division carved through 1,000 yards between 14 and 15 March, as many of the Japanese troops met a fiery end at the hands of the Marines' flame-throwing tanks. The following day, the 21st Regiment flanked the Japanese on the right, providing the US forces with two attack fronts to decimate the remaining forces.

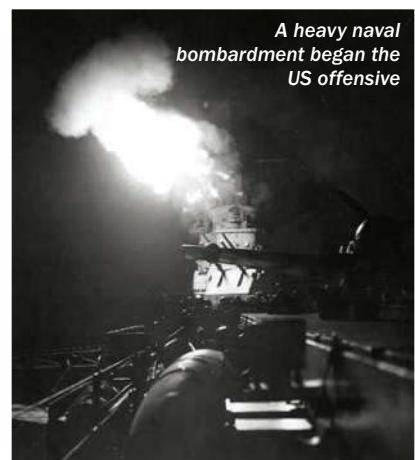
By 25 March, organised enemy resistance was declared over. However, Kuribayashi's



*US Amtracs became stuck in the churned up sand of Iwo Jima's beaches*



*A Marine calls in for artillery support to counter enemy mortar attacks in his area*



*A heavy naval bombardment began the US offensive*

## "OF THE 20,060 JAPANESE TROOPS ON THE ISLAND, ONLY 216 WERE EVER CAPTURED, WITH ROUGHLY 300 LEFT HIDING IN THE TUNNELS FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE WAR"

men had one final assault up their sleeve. In the vicinity of Motoyama 2, some 300 men assembled that evening. On the morning of the 26 March 1945, they stormed the US camp, killing sleeping Marines at will until a defensive line was formed by the Americans as dawn broke, sending the remaining Japanese into hiding.

After 36 days, the Battle of Iwo Jima became a manhunt, with at least 223 Japanese soldiers hunted and killed. General Kuribayashi was rumoured to have been among those slain, bringing to an end a bloody conflict that saw more than 70,000 Marines deployed.

Of the 20,060 Japanese troops on the island, only 216 were ever captured, with roughly 300 left hiding in the tunnels for

the remainder of the war. On the US side, 5,931 Marines were killed, with a further 17,372 injured – the only time in the Pacific Theatre that American casualties outnumbered those of the Japanese. General Holland Smith had "thrown human flesh against reinforced concrete" in taking the island of Iwo Jima. However, in the ensuing aerial war against the Japanese mainland, over 2,200 heavy bombers made unscheduled landings on the island's airstrips, saving 24,761 US airmen from potential disaster.

Iwo Jima was a grim yet inspirational victory for the Americans that demoralised their enemy. Mainland Japan had never seemed closer to the United States. A final victory in the Pacific was in sight.

## OPPOSING FORCES



vs



LEADER: Major  
General Simon Bolivar  
Buckner Jr  
INFANTRY: 180,000  
ARTILLERY: 2,000  
TANKS: 350  
AIRCRAFT: 3,500  
SHIPS: 1,300

LEADER: Lieutenant  
General Mitsuru Ushijima  
INFANTRY: 110,000  
ARTILLERY: 1,700  
TANKS: 27  
AIRCRAFT: 5,000  
SHIPS: 20



A US Marine charges through Japanese machine gun fire on Okinawa

OKINAWA, APRIL - JUNE 1945

# FIRESTORM AT OKINAWA

The last campaign of World War II in the Pacific required an arduous 82 days for the Allies to claim victory

WORDS MIKE HASKEW

**I**t was a curious coincidence – Operation Iceberg, the Allied invasion of Okinawa, was scheduled for 1 April 1945, both Easter Sunday and April Fool's Day. Short of an invasion of Japan itself, the island in the Ryukyu archipelago was the last objective of the Allied campaign across the Pacific Ocean during World War II. Only 547 kilometres from the Japanese Home Islands, Okinawa would provide the sternest test of the war for the Marine III Amphibious Corps and the US Army's XXIV Corps, comprising the Tenth Army under Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner, a veteran army officer and the son of a Confederate general from the American Civil War.

The invasion date was designated Love-Day (L-Day) to avoid confusion with the 1944 D-Day landings in France. Actually, the Allied build-up was larger than that of D-Day. The US and British Royal Navies brought 1,300 warships and support vessels along with 750,000 tons of supplies to the waters off Okinawa.

Buckner's Tenth Army included more than 180,000 troops. Marine Major General Roy S Geiger led the III Amphibious Corps, including three divisions – the veteran 1st Marine

Division, nicknamed the Old Breed, the 6th, and the 2nd in reserve. Major General John R Hodge commanded the XXIV Army Corps, including four infantry divisions – the 7th, 77th, 96th and reserve 27th.

The recent carnage at Iwo Jima remained fresh in American minds and a bloodbath was also expected at Okinawa. During the week before L-Day, navy guns fired 13,000 shells and carrier-based aircraft flew 3,095 missions. The L-Day landings were to hit the Hagushi beaches on Okinawa's southwestern shore. After the anticipated fight to gain a foothold, the Americans intended to advance eastward across the Ishikawa Peninsula, seizing Yontan and Kadena airfields. Splitting the island in two, they would swing north and south, fighting their way to opposite shores, completing the conquest of Okinawa. Another worrisome aspect of Operation Iceberg was the kamikaze threat to the host of Fifth Fleet ships obliged to remain offshore. Japanese suicide planes were expected to assault these rich targets with unprecedented vigour.

82 days of fighting on Okinawa and the nearby cluster of small islands also seized yielded an immense harvest of destruction.

**"THE RECENT CARNAGE AT IWO JIMA REMAINED FRESH IN AMERICAN MINDS AND A BLOODBATH WAS ALSO EXPECTED"**

By the time the island was declared secure on 22 June 1945, American deaths totalled 7,374, while 31,807 were wounded and 239 were missing. The navy suffered 4,907 casualties, 120 ships were damaged and 29 had been sunk. Marines and soldiers earned 23 Medals of Honor, many of them posthumous.

The Japanese garrison, under Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima, commander of the 32nd Army, fielded over 100,000 troops – only 11,000 prisoners surrendered. A total of 2,373 Kamikaze pilots died and thousands of sailors perished in the Imperial Japanese Navy's last substantial offensive action of the war. Many died when the super battleship Yamato sank under a fusillade of bombs and aerial torpedoes. An estimated 150,000 Okinawan civilians lost their lives.

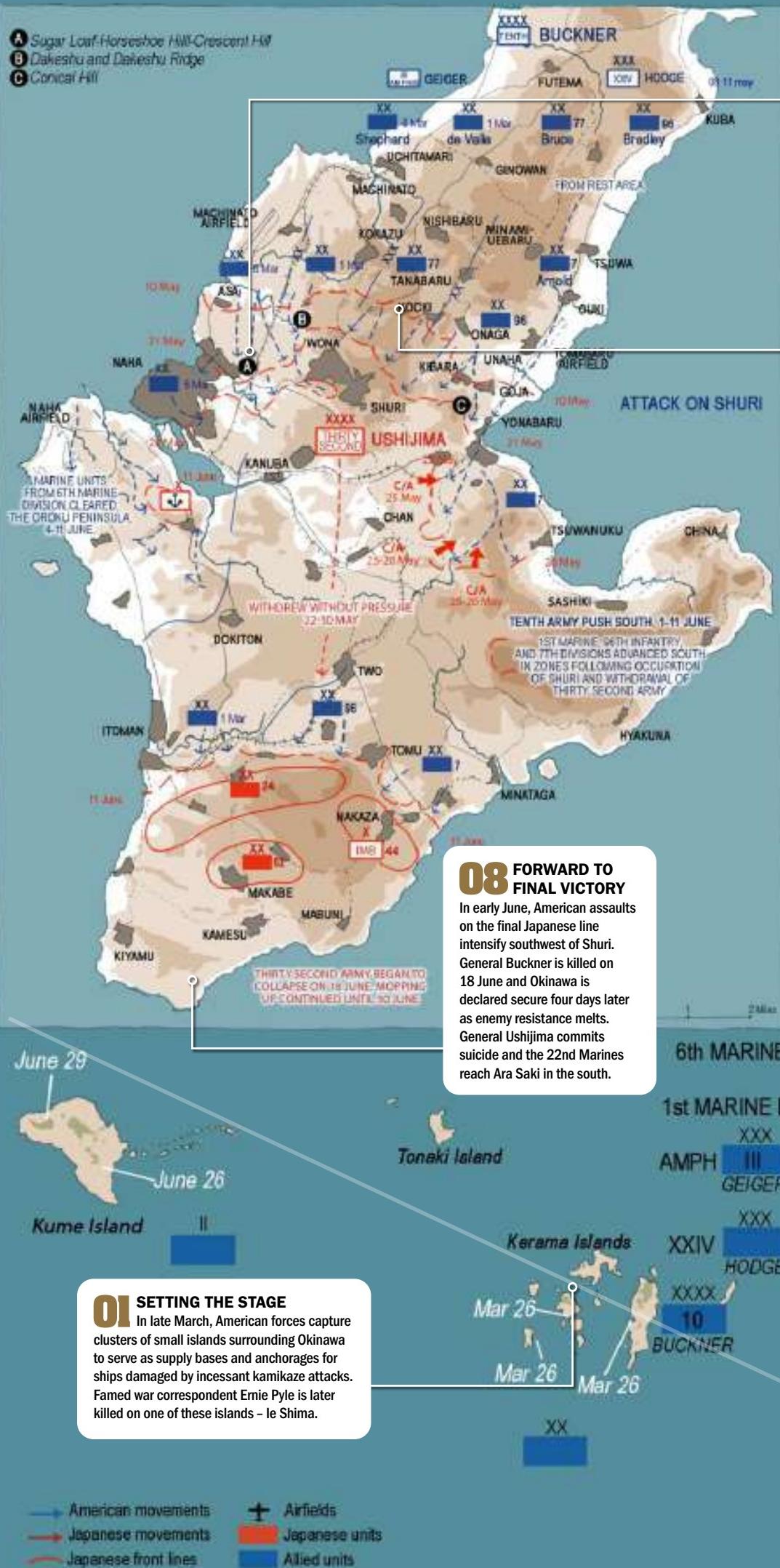
Under a canopy of aircraft and naval bombardment, the invasion rolled forward on the morning of 1 April, landing craft engines stirring white wakes extending 12 kilometres across. Virtually no resistance was encountered. By the end of L-Day, 60,000 American troops occupied a beachhead 4,600 metres deep and 14,000 metres wide. 28 men were killed, 104 wounded and 27 missing.

Ushijima watched the awe-inspiring sight from his command post at Shuri Castle, the ancient abode of the kings who once ruled the Ryukyus, as the Americans put 16,000 troops ashore in an hour. A firm advocate of defence in depth, he conceded the beachhead and airfields to draw the Americans inland, where he would defend the island to the last man. His forces included the 9th, 24th and 62nd Divisions. Independent brigades and artillery, engineer and naval troops were also attached. For the death struggle, the Japanese constructed three defensive lines across southern Okinawa.

Early progress was swift. In four days, American troops took territory they thought would require three weeks of combat. Both airfields were captured on the first day. By 3 April, the 1st Marine Division crossed the Ishikawa Isthmus, captured the Katchin Peninsula and cut Okinawa in half. The airfields were quickly operational. Marine Air Groups 31 and 33 flew in from aircraft carriers and an Army Air Force fighter wing also arrived.

Soon enough, the Marines found stubborn resistance. Five battalions of the 4th and 29th Marines attacked 365-metre Mount Yae-Take and 2,000 enemy troops under Colonel Takesiko Udo. The Marines were stonewalled by enemy machine guns and mortars. The 14-inch guns of the battleship USS Tennessee barked, and Corsairs of Marine Fighter Squadron 322 (VMF-322) bombed and strafed. The Udo Force was slaughtered while the Marines took 964 casualties clearing the area.

The 7th and 96th Divisions hit the first defensive line on 19 April. The 27th Division was soon committed. Minimal gains could not be held and the attack faltered, meaning that Sherman tanks got separated from supporting infantry while advancing near Kakazu and enemy guns knocked out 22 of the 30 that were sent forward. On 23 April, Admiral Chester W Nimitz, commander in chief of the Pacific, arrived on Okinawa and voiced his concerns for the Fifth Fleet as kamikaze attacks intensified.



# OKINAWA

I APRIL - 22 JUNE 1945

## 06 SAVAGERY AT SUGAR LOAF

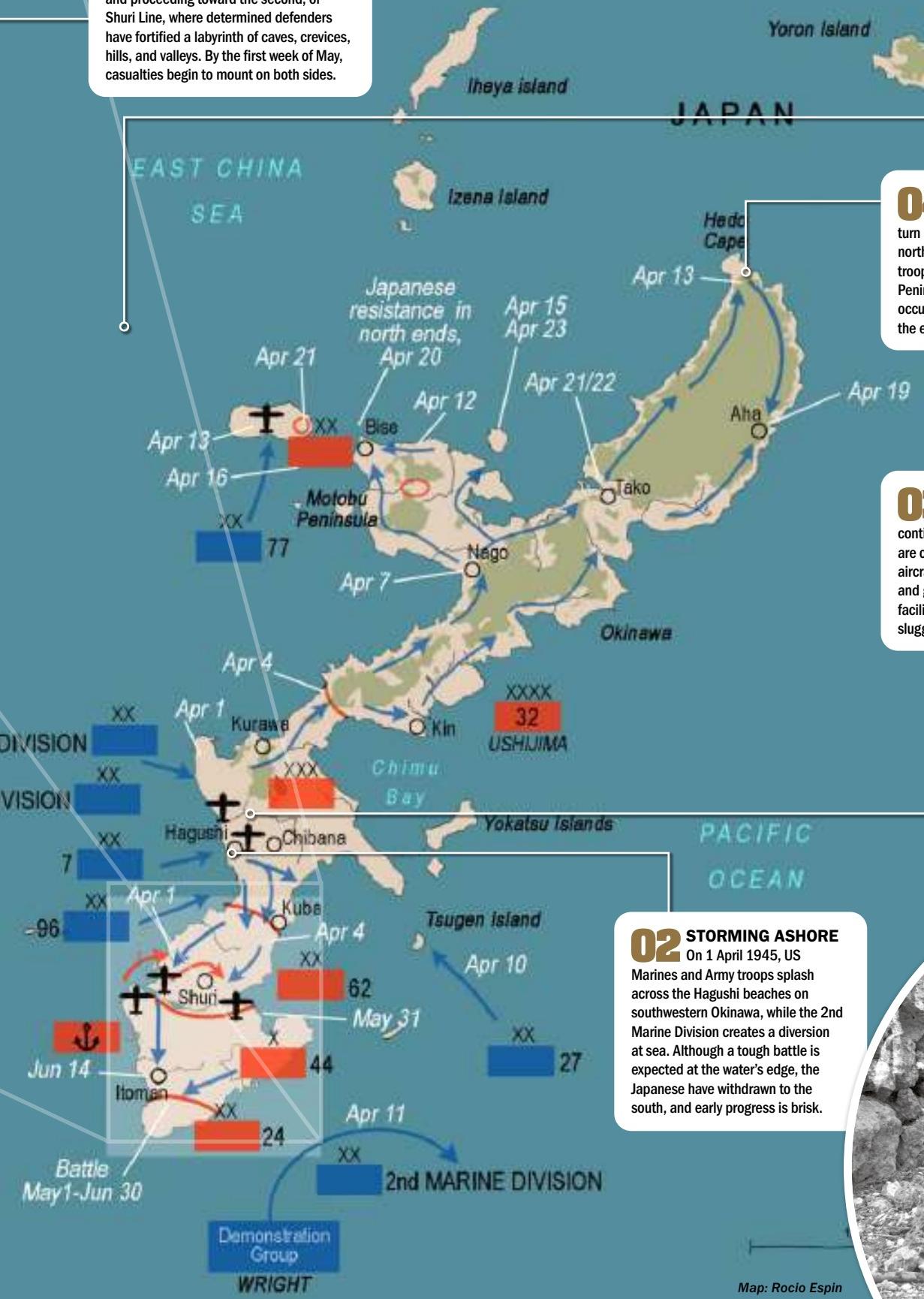
In late May, American forces finally capture the Sugar Loaf-Half Moon-Horseshoe complex of mutually supporting hills, significant progress against the Shuri Line. After losing nearly 3,000 men, the Americans compel the Japanese to abandon strong positions at Shuri Ridge and Shuri Castle.

## 05 FIRST LINE BREACHED

For three weeks, the Americans batter the first of three Japanese defensive lines, finally forcing an enemy withdrawal and proceeding toward the second, or Shuri Line, where determined defenders have fortified a labyrinth of caves, crevices, hills, and valleys. By the first week of May, casualties begin to mount on both sides.

## 07 KAMIKAZE RAIN OF STEEL

For weeks, the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and British warships are subjected to Operation Ten-Go, an onslaught of Japanese suicide planes that ravages Allied ships, including picket line destroyers and aircraft carriers. More than 300 ships are damaged before Ten-Go blows itself out. The fleet remains on station.



## 02 STORMING ASHORE

On 1 April 1945, US Marines and Army troops splash across the Hagushi beaches on southwestern Okinawa, while the 2nd Marine Division creates a diversion at sea. Although a tough battle is expected at the water's edge, the Japanese have withdrawn to the south, and early progress is brisk.

## 04 RAPID RUN NORTHWARD

The Americans bisect Okinawa and then turn north and south. Japanese resistance in the north is sporadic and sacrificial, and many enemy troops are bottled up and annihilated in the Motobu Peninsula. By 13 April, the 22nd Marines have occupied thumb-shaped Hedo Misaki Peninsula at the extreme northern tip of the island.

## 03 CAPTURING KEY AIRFIELDS

Kadena and Yontan airfields, keys to continuing support of the American ground offensive, are captured on the first day. Marine, navy and army aircraft are soon flying combat air patrol, interdiction, and ground support missions from these airfields, facilitating the advance, which nevertheless grows sluggish as enemy resistance intensifies.

A Marine glances briefly at the body of a dead Japanese soldier as he passes with comrades through a shattered Okinawan village





Marines of 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines manoeuvre at Wana Ridge. One fires his Thompson submachine gun; the other carries a Browning Automatic Rifle

Hammering Buckner to energise the offensive, Nimitz snarled that if Buckner was not up to the task, "We'll get someone here to move it... I'm losing a ship and a half each day out here."

Nimitz was blunt for a reason – Japanese Operation Ten-Go was unleashing 4,500 kamikazes against the Fifth Fleet, filling the skies with ten mass sorties nicknamed Kikusui, or Floating Chrysanthemums, each including 350 or more aircraft. The sailors of the Fifth Fleet endured, earning the nickname of 'the fleet that came to stay'. Two kamikazes ripped into the aircraft carrier USS Bunker Hill on 11 May, its 58th day on station.

American fighter pilots shot down scores of kamikazes. On 22 April, three Marine Corsairs of VMF-323 flamed 16 in 20 minutes. Nevertheless, some suicide planes got through. The stand of the Fifth Fleet (redesignated Third Fleet when Admiral William F 'Bull' Halsey relieved Admiral Raymond A Spruance on 27 May) wrote a stirring chapter in US naval history.

After three weeks of fighting, Ushijima pulled surviving defenders out of the first line, cloaked under steady rain and thick fog. In early May, the Tenth Army was poised to assault the second, or Shuri Line, four divisions abreast across a 8,200-metre front. On 2 May, the 1st Marine Division assaulted the Awacha Pocket. The 5th Marines advanced through a downpour but ran into enemy fire from concealed positions. It took a week to clear Awacha.

22-year-old Private Dale M Hansen of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, lost his rifle as it was shattered by an enemy bullet during his single-handed destruction of a Japanese pillbox on 7 May. He picked up another weapon and ran up an adjacent ridge but six Japanese soldiers blocked his path. Hansen shot four – but then his rifle jammed. The two survivors pounced. Hansen swung the rifle's butt and slipped away. Grabbing a third rifle and a

## "GRABBING A THIRD RIFLE AND A CLUTCH OF GRENADES, HANSEN CHARGED FORWARD AGAIN, KILLING EIGHT ENEMY SOLDIERS AND SMASHING A MORTAR POSITION"

clutch of grenades, Hansen charged forward again, killing eight enemy soldiers and smashing a mortar position. More Marines followed, claiming the ridgeline. Hansen was killed by a sniper four days later. On 30 May 1946, his parents accepted his posthumous Medal of Honor.

The 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, reached the top of Dakeshi Ridge twice on 11 May but was forced to retire. A day later, three Sherman tanks, two mounting flamethrowers, charged ahead of the riflemen spitting flame and machine gun bullets and claimed the high ground. The Marines atop Dakeshi Ridge looked southward towards the rocky jumble of Wana Draw and nearby Wana Ridge. The 1st Marine Division flung itself against the outcroppings, cliffs and caves. Progress was measured in yards. Through 19 days of horror, Marine casualties averaged 200 for every 100-yard advance.

Marine and army tanks fired 5,000 75mm shells and 175,000 rounds of .30-calibre ammunition on 16 May alone. The 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines lost a dozen officers in four days. The 7th Marines took 700 casualties at Dakeshi Ridge and 500 more in five days at Wana Draw.

500 replacements reached the 1st Marines, which relieved the 7th Marines, and renewed the attacks on Wana Draw, 365 metres wide at its mouth but narrowing southward towards Shuri Ridge, funnelling Marines into interlocking fields of fire. By 20 May, the 5th Marines had taken Hill 55 west of Wana Draw but at the end of the month,

the 1st Marine Division was bogged down one ridgeline short of Shuri.

Meanwhile, to the west, the 6th Marine Division crossed the Asa River on 10 May, advancing 900 metres in 36 hours. By 12 May, it had drawn up around a nondescript hill rising precipitously 70 metres. The riflemen nicknamed it Sugar Loaf. Sugar Loaf was flanked by two more hills dubbed Half Moon and Horseshoe. The Marines did not initially realise that the complex was the western command nexus of the Shuri Line. 2,000 Japanese soldiers defended Sugar Loaf and another 3,000 held Half Moon and Horseshoe.

The battle for the Sugar Loaf-Half Moon-Horseshoe triad extended for ten harrowing days. Captain Owen G Stebbins of Company G, 2nd Battalion, 22nd Marines, led his command towards Sugar Loaf. In seconds, two platoons were pinned under a torrent of enemy fire. Stebbins and executive officer Lieutenant Dale W Bair kept the third platoon moving. 28 of the 40 men were quickly killed or wounded.

Stebbins was hit in both of his legs. Bair was shot in the left arm but still he persevered, gathering 25 Marines and charging to Sugar Loaf's crest although he was ultimately unable to hold it. Five attempts had come up short. Just 75 of the original 200 Marines in Company G were unscathed.

After dark on 14 May, the 29th Marines reinforced the 22nd Marines. 44 men were marooned on Sugar Loaf's slope with at least 100 bodies lying around them. Major Henry A Courtney Jr, executive officer of the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Marines, decided that his



*Torpedo bombers and fighters of the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm occupy the flight deck of the carrier HMS Implacable*



*The Japanese sometimes pressed teenagers and young boys into service. Here, an American soldier attempts to communicate with two of them*

men could not remain where they were but withdrawal would invite a hostile response. He reasoned that the best option was to attack so he roused Marines of Companies F and G and asked for volunteers. Courtney led all 44 Marines again to Sugar Loaf's crest. They held until after dark, when 15 survivors scrambled down. Courtney, however, died when a mortar fragment slashed his neck. He received a posthumous Medal of Honor.

Corporal James L Day's seven-man squad from Company F, 2nd Battalion, 22nd Marines, had followed Courtney up Sugar Loaf. Quickly, five men were shot. Day and Private Dale Bertoli were alone on the western slope. For four days and three nights the pair peppered rifle bullets and tossed grenades at the Japanese – Day was wounded and Bertoli was killed later. In 1984, Major General James L Day would return to Okinawa and take command of its Marine garrison. The 22nd Marines had lost 400 casualties, nearly half its number, in three days.

On 17 May, Company E, 2nd Battalion, 29th Marines, charged Sugar Loaf four times, losing 160 men but holding the hill for several hours before withdrawing at dusk. On 18 May, Company D, 2nd Battalion, 29th Marines, under Captain Howard L Mabie, assaulted Sugar Loaf while suppressing fire, keeping Japanese heads down on Half Moon and Horseshoe. Mabie's Marines skirted both flanks, negotiated minefields and emptied their weapons into clusters of Japanese soldiers emerging from bunkers on the reverse slope. Company D's grip on Sugar Loaf held.

The 4th Marines relieved the 29th and by 20 May, its 3rd Battalion controlled most of

Horseshoe, while the 2nd Battalion held most of Half Moon. The 6th Marine Division had lost nearly 2,700 casualties fighting for Sugar Loaf.

While the Marines battled in the west, the 96th Division took Conical Hill and the 7th Division were able to secure Yonabaru. Ushijima's flanks were vulnerable and his positions at Shuri Ridge and Shuri Castle were untenable. He finally withdrew to the final line across the Kiyamu Peninsula under a cloak of steady rain and fog.

Foul weather slowed the American advance – nevertheless, 6th Marine Division tanks probed the village of Naha on 28 May. The next morning, Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, managed to reach the crest of Shuri Ridge without firing a shot, crossing into the 77th Division zone to occupy the much-coveted Shuri Castle.

Ushijima's six-kilometre front then stretched across Kunishi Ridge in the west to Hill 89, the site of his last command post, and to Hill 95. Meanwhile, the 6th Marine Division secured the Oroku Peninsula and Naha Airfield in a joint land and amphibious craft assault, decimating 5,000 Japanese defenders under the command of Rear Admiral Minoru Ota.

The 7th Division's 32nd Regiment captured Hill 95 on 12 June, while the 17th Regiment took the eastern end of the Yuza Dake escarpment, unhinging Ushijima's right flank. The 96th Division claimed the rest of Yuza Dake the next day and the 1st Marine Division concurrently began its assault on the western anchor of the Japanese line. With Colonel Edward Snedecker's 7th Marines in the lead, initial assaults on Kunishi Ridge on 11 June were repulsed. Snedecker ordered a night

attack and two Marine companies reached the crest near sunrise, mowing down surprised Japanese troops who were cooking breakfast and preparing for the day.

The Japanese mounted some heavy counterattacks. Three attempts to reinforce the Marines atop Kunishi Ridge were thwarted but the 1st, 5th and 7th Marines slowly made gains. In five days, the last heavily defended ridgeline on Okinawa was finally subdued. On 18 June, the 7th Marines finally trudged rearward to be relieved by the 8th Marines, 2nd Marine Division.

General Buckner climbed Mezado Ridge to observe the 8th's deployment. Five Japanese artillery shells crashed down, spraying rock and shrapnel – a splinter the size of a dime struck Buckner in the chest. One of the highest-ranking American officers killed in action in World War II, he died in ten minutes. General Roy Geiger handled the Tenth Army for five days until Army General Joseph Stilwell arrived to take over the command.

Geiger declared Okinawa secure on 22 June, while elements of the 7th Division took Hill 89, and the 77th Division captured Hill 85. That same day, as 7th Division troops neared the entrance to his headquarters in a cave on Hill 89, General Ushijima committed ritual suicide along with Rear Admiral Ota. The 6th Marine Division turned south from the Oroku Peninsula, occupying Ara Saki, Okinawa's southernmost point. Company G, 2nd Battalion, 22nd Marines, raised the Stars and Stripes. The great battle of Okinawa, the climax of the Pacific land campaign, was over. Until that time, suffering on such a scale had seemed impossible.

# MEDITERRANEAN & NORTH AFRICAN THEATRES

104 CHARTING THE WESTERN DESERT CAMPAIGN

## **106 BREAKING ROMMEL'S SIEGE**

## **114 THE ASSAULT ON FORTRESS EUROPE**

## **120 THE INVASION OF ITALY**

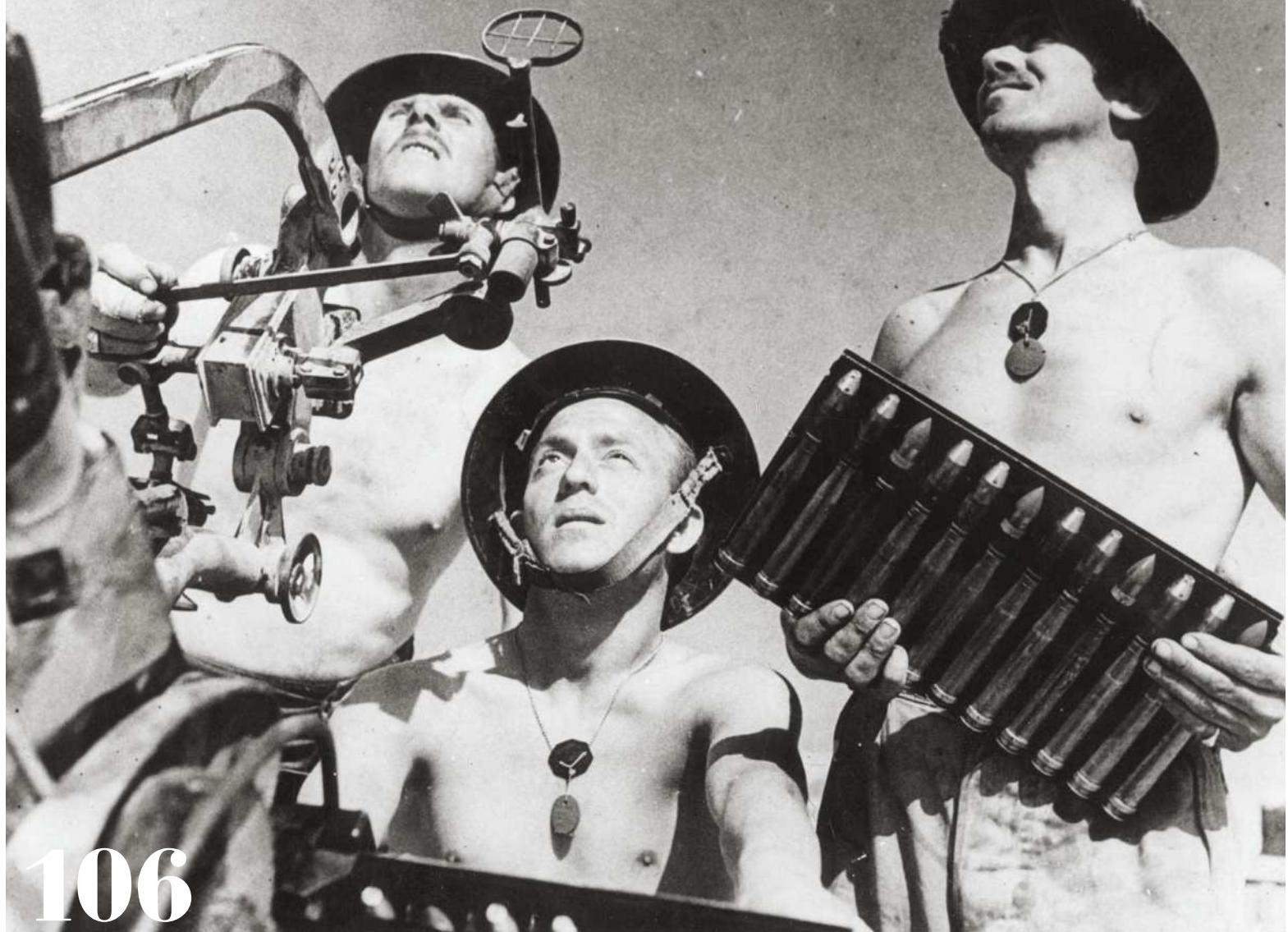
## **124 BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO**



124



120



106



114

# CHARTING THE WESTERN DESERT CAMPAIGN

The war in the desert was a relentless litany of battles, operations, sieges and raids across the scorching sands of Libya and Egypt

## 1 BATTLE OF SIDI BARRANI

10-11 DECEMBER 1940 SIDI BARRANI, EGYPT

The first battle of the British counteroffensive is assigned as 'Operation Compass'. The offensive is successful and the British are able to eject Italian forces from Egypt while capturing tens of thousands of soldiers.



## 2 BATTLE OF BEDA FOMM

5-7 FEBRUARY 1941 BEDA FOMM, CYRENAICA, LIBYA

The British rapidly advance into Libya and cut off the Italian Tenth Army at Beda Fomm. Although there is fierce fighting, 25,000 Italian troops are captured. The victory is a significant boost to British morale.

## 3 FIRST SIEGE OF TOBRUK

10 APRIL-10 DECEMBER 1941 TOBRUK, LIBYA

A beleaguered Allied garrison holds out for eight months against German and Italian attacks. Although it is captured the following year in a humiliating British defeat, the first siege prevents Rommel from taking full advantage of his offensive into Egypt and weakens his defences on the Egyptian-Libyan frontier.



## TWIN PIMPLES COMMANDO RAID

17-18 JULY 1941 TOBRUK, LIBYA

## OPERATION AGREEMENT

13-14 SEPTEMBER 1942 NEAR TOBRUK, LIBYA

## BATTLE OF EL AGHEILA

11-18 DECEMBER 1942 EL AGHEILA, LIBYA

## ACTION AT MECHILI

24 JANUARY 1941 MECHILI, LIBYA

## FIRST AND SECOND BATTLES OF BIR EL GUBI

19 NOVEMBER AND 4-7 DECEMBER 1941 BIR EL GUBI, LIBYA

## BATTLE OF BIR HAKEIM

26 MAY-11 JUNE 1942 BIR HAKEIM, LIBYA

## BATTLE OF SIDI REZEGH

NOVEMBER 1941 SIDI REZEGH, LIBYA

## BATTLE OF POINT 175

29 NOVEMBER-1 DECEMBER 1941 SIDI REZEGH, LIBYA

## CAPTURE OF KUFRA

31 JANUARY-1 MARCH 1941 KUFRA, LIBYA

## 4 OPERATION BATTLEAXE

15-17 JUNE 1941 CYRENAICA, LIBYA

Battleaxe is an unsuccessful British offensive that attempts to raise the First Siege of Tobruk. Attacks are made against Rommel's strong defensive positions but the majority fail. The British lose 220 tanks, which at that time makes up half of their armoured vehicles in North Africa.

Right: Australian Gloster Gladiator biplanes return to base after flying a patrol over Bardia



### BARDIA COMMANDO RAID

19-20 APRIL 1941

BARDIA, CYRENAICA, LIBYA

### BATTLE OF BARDIA

3-5 JANUARY 1941

BARDIA, LIBYA

### ATTACK ON NIBEIWA

9 DECEMBER 1940

NIBEIWA, EGYPT

### OPERATION SKORPION

26-27 MAY 1941

HALFYA PASS, EGYPT

### SIEGE OF GIARABUB

DECEMBER 1940-MARCH 1941

GIARABUB, LIBYA

### OPERATION BREVITY

15-16 MAY 1941

EGYPTIAN-LIBYAN BORDER

### OPERATION BRAGANZA

29 SEPTEMBER 1942

DEIR EL MUNASSIB, EGYPT

### 8 SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

23 OCTOBER-11 NOVEMBER 1942 EL ALAMEIN, EGYPT

Bernard Montgomery launches a well-prepared offensive against Rommel's Axis forces at El Alamein after reinvigorating Eighth Army. Using great tactical flair, strategy and dogged courage, the Allied victory is decisive and Rommel is forced to abandon Egypt.

### 9 BATTLE OF EL AGHEILA

11-18 DECEMBER 1942 EL AGHEILA, LIBYA

El Agheila is a rearguard action in the aftermath of El Alamein. Rommel abandons Cyrenaica and withdraws to a strong defensive position but Montgomery, who has reorganised Eighth Army, outflanks the Axis forces. Rommel is forced to retreat to the Mareth Line after this last significant stand in Libya.

### 5 BATTLE OF GAZALA

26 MAY-21 JUNE 1942 GAZALA, NEAR TOBRUK, LIBYA

Erwin Rommel launches a daring attack against strong British defensive positions on the Gazala Line. Although he changes plans halfway through the battle, the German commander wins his most impressive victory and forces the Allies back to Egypt.

### 6 BATTLE OF MERSA MATRUH

26-29 JUNE 1942 MERSA MATRUH, EGYPT

This battle is Rommel's last victory against Eighth Army when he takes the fortress port of Mersa Matruh and captures thousands of prisoners. The Allies are now forced to retreat to El Alamein, the last defensive position before Alexandria.

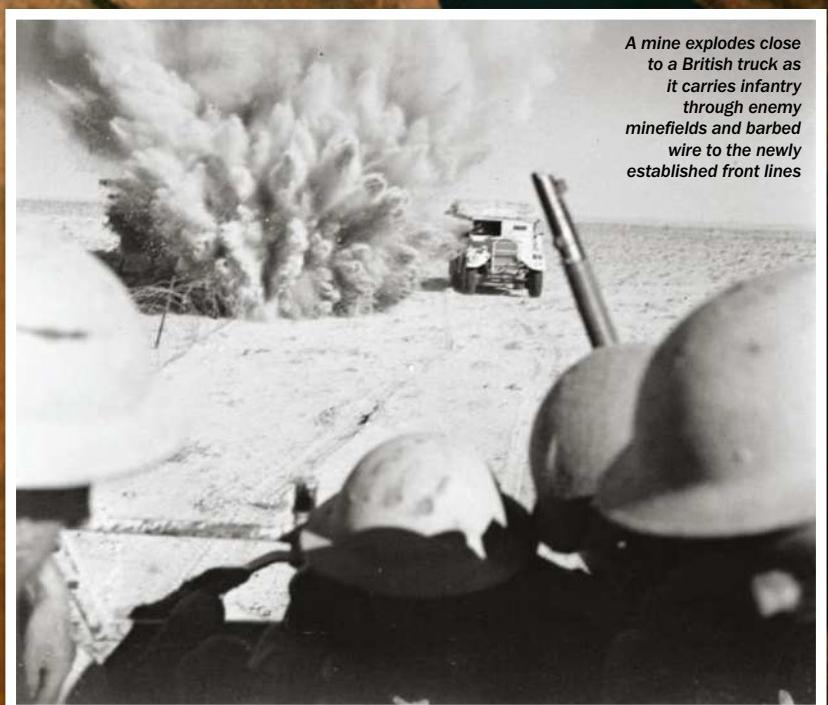
### 7 OPERATION BERTRAM

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1942 EL ALAMEIN, EGYPT

Bertram is an elaborate deception plan for the Second Battle of El Alamein. Using a dummy armoured corps, water pipeline and an amphibious landing among other deceptions, the British aim to convince the Germans that Eighth Army will begin an offensive in November at the southern end of the front at El Alamein.



Above: The framework of a dummy tank under construction in the Western Desert at the Middle East School of Camouflage



A mine explodes close to a British truck as it carries infantry through enemy minefields and barbed wire to the newly established front lines

LIBYA, APRIL - DECEMBER 1941

# BREAKING ROMMEL'S SIEGE

For eight long months, Commonwealth and Allied forces organised the defence of Tobruk, denying an advance port to facilitate an Axis invasion of Egypt. This arguably saved British forces from an humiliating early defeat in the North African campaign

WORDS MIKE HASKEW

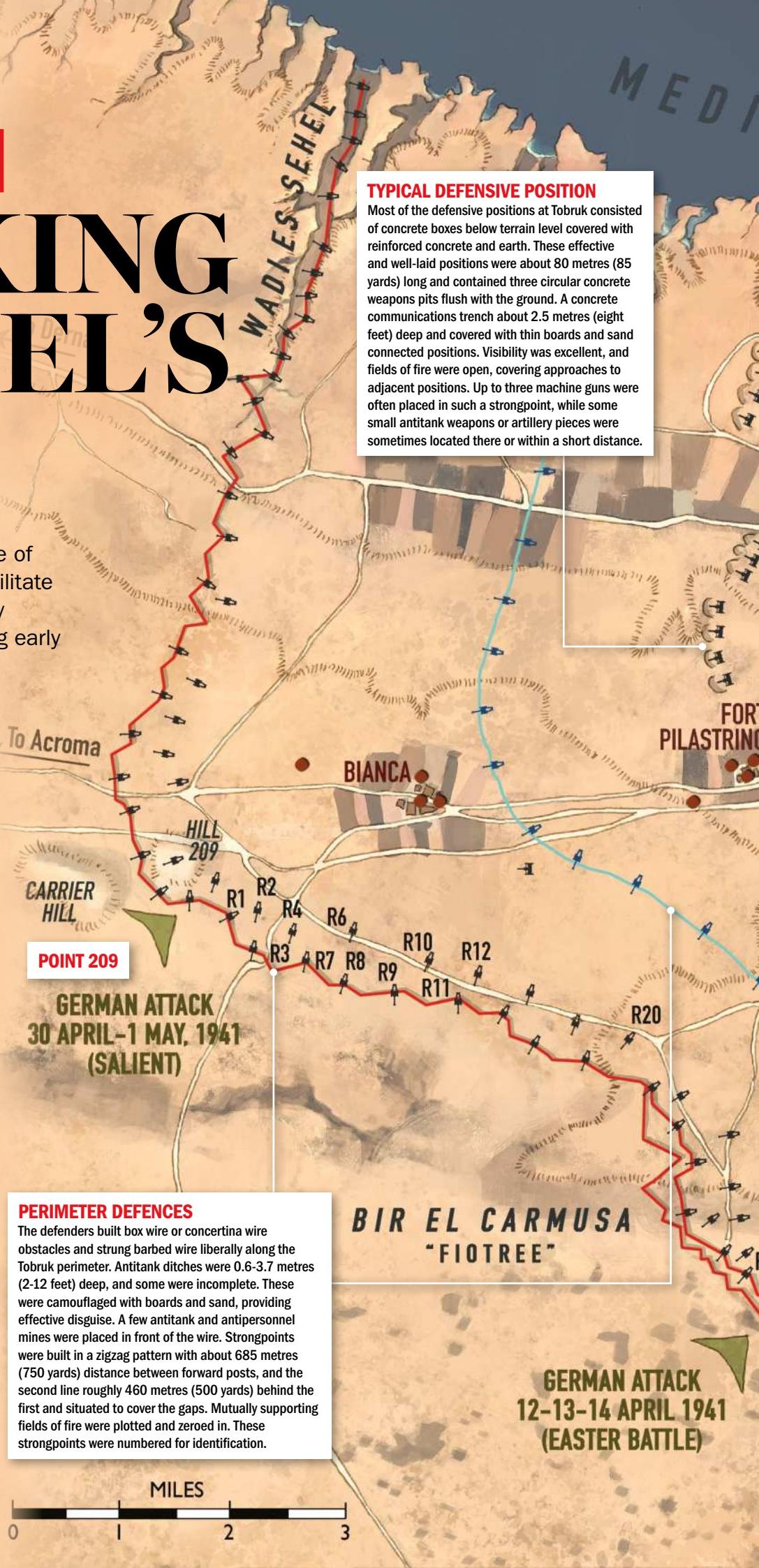
Throughout the ebb and flow of the North African Campaign during World War II, Tobruk, a major port city on the Mediterranean coast of Libya, was a glittering prize. Possession of Tobruk facilitated operations east and west, and it became the scene of desperate fighting several times.

However, the heroic defence of the city during more than 240 days of siege, from April to December 1941, is remembered as a defining chapter in the history of the armed forces of Britain and the Commonwealth. The epic siege itself came about somewhat by accident. Operation Compass, a British counter-offensive intended for only a limited duration, became a sustained action that produced a resounding triumph in the desert against the Italian Tenth Army. However, its consequence was the deployment of German forces – the Deutsches Afrika Korps – to the continent. The Afrika Korps commander, General Erwin Rommel, was later to become the 'Desert Fox', the stuff of legend.

In response to the Italian invasion of Egypt in the autumn of 1940, the British Western Desert Force, numbering only 36,000, struck back at the 250,000-man Italian Tenth Army, repelling the invaders and carrying the fight across the Libyan frontier. General Richard O'Connor swept across the desert, occupying the whole of the province of Cyrenaica in eastern Libya and bagging 130,000 prisoners during operations from December 1940 to February 1941. The crowning achievement was the capture of Tobruk, which fell to Commonwealth forces in late January.

## TYPICAL DEFENSIVE POSITION

Most of the defensive positions at Tobruk consisted of concrete boxes below terrain level covered with reinforced concrete and earth. These effective and well-laid positions were about 80 metres (85 yards) long and contained three circular concrete weapons pits flush with the ground. A concrete communications trench about 2.5 metres (eight feet) deep and covered with thin boards and sand connected positions. Visibility was excellent, and fields of fire were open, covering approaches to adjacent positions. Up to three machine guns were often placed in such a strongpoint, while some small antitank weapons or artillery pieces were sometimes located there or within a short distance.

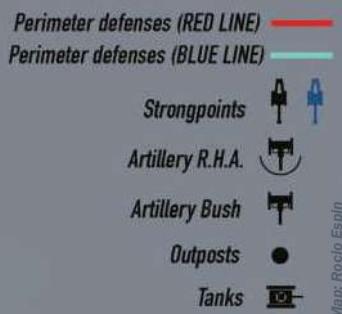


## PERIMETER DEFENCES

The defenders built box wire or concertina wire obstacles and strung barbed wire liberally along the Tobruk perimeter. Antitank ditches were 0.6-3.7 metres (2-12 feet) deep, and some were incomplete. These were camouflaged with boards and sand, providing effective disguise. A few antitank and antipersonnel mines were placed in front of the wire. Strongpoints were built in a zigzag pattern with about 685 metres (750 yards) distance between forward posts, and the second line roughly 460 metres (500 yards) behind the first and situated to cover the gaps. Mutually supporting fields of fire were plotted and zeroed in. These strongpoints were numbered for identification.

# THE SIEGE

FIXED FORTIFICATIONS AND SUPPORTING DEFENSIVE POSITIONS AT TOBRUK, INCLUDING MINEFIELDS AND TANK TRAPS, WERE CONSTRUCTED INITIALLY BY ENGINEERS OF THE ITALIAN ARMY AND THEN IMPROVED BY THE BRITISH AND AUSTRALIANS



## DEFENCE IN DEPTH

The defences of Tobruk, much of them originally constructed by Italian engineers, were arranged in three lines. The first, the Red Line, 13-16 kilometres (eight to ten miles) from the inner harbour, consisted of mutually supporting fortifications, artillery emplacements and antitank minefields designed to disrupt any penetration. The second, the Blue Line, was three kilometres (two miles) behind the Red Line and manned by three reserve battalions. General Morshead instructed forward positions to hold while the Blue Line absorbed any breakthrough. If the enemy breached the Blue Line and mobile reserves could not hold, available forces were to concentrate at the innermost Green Line for the last stand.

### ARTILLERY POSITIONS

The devastating use of artillery had a telling effect on the Axis effort to capture Tobruk. Morshead skilfully placed as many as 40 artillery pieces so that they could fire in virtually any threatened direction without being relocated. One of the most effective uses of artillery occurred between 30 April-1 May when the 25-pounder guns of the 51st Field Regiment blasted the German effort to capture Point 209. Although they were temporarily successful, the Germans could not hold their deepest penetrations, largely due to the galling British artillery fire. Morshead also employed captured Italian guns, known as Bush Artillery, turning them from coastal positions to face inland.

The entire dynamic of the desert war had been altered in favour of the Allies. But two significant developments rapidly removed the lustre of their accomplishments.

By May, Winston Churchill was asserting that Allied forces in Greece needed support, and Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell, head of Middle East Command, transferred much of his available troops and equipment there. At the same time, Germany committed forces to bolster its flagging Italian ally in North Africa.

The first German formations to arrive had reached the Libyan capital and port of Tripoli in February 1941, and Rommel was there to meet them. The Afrika Korps comprised the 5th Light Division, 15th Panzer Division and later the 90th Light Division. Together with six Italian armoured and infantry divisions – Ariete, Savona, Trieste, Brescia, Bologna and Pavia – these Axis formations constituted Panzergruppe Afrika, which formed in August 1941. Though nominally under Italian command for most of his North African sojourn, it was understood that Rommel ran the show.

Although he had been told to delay an offensive until his strength was further augmented, Rommel demurred, intent on taking advantage of an opportunity that he rightly recognised as fleeting. "We must attack Tobruk with everything we have before Tommy

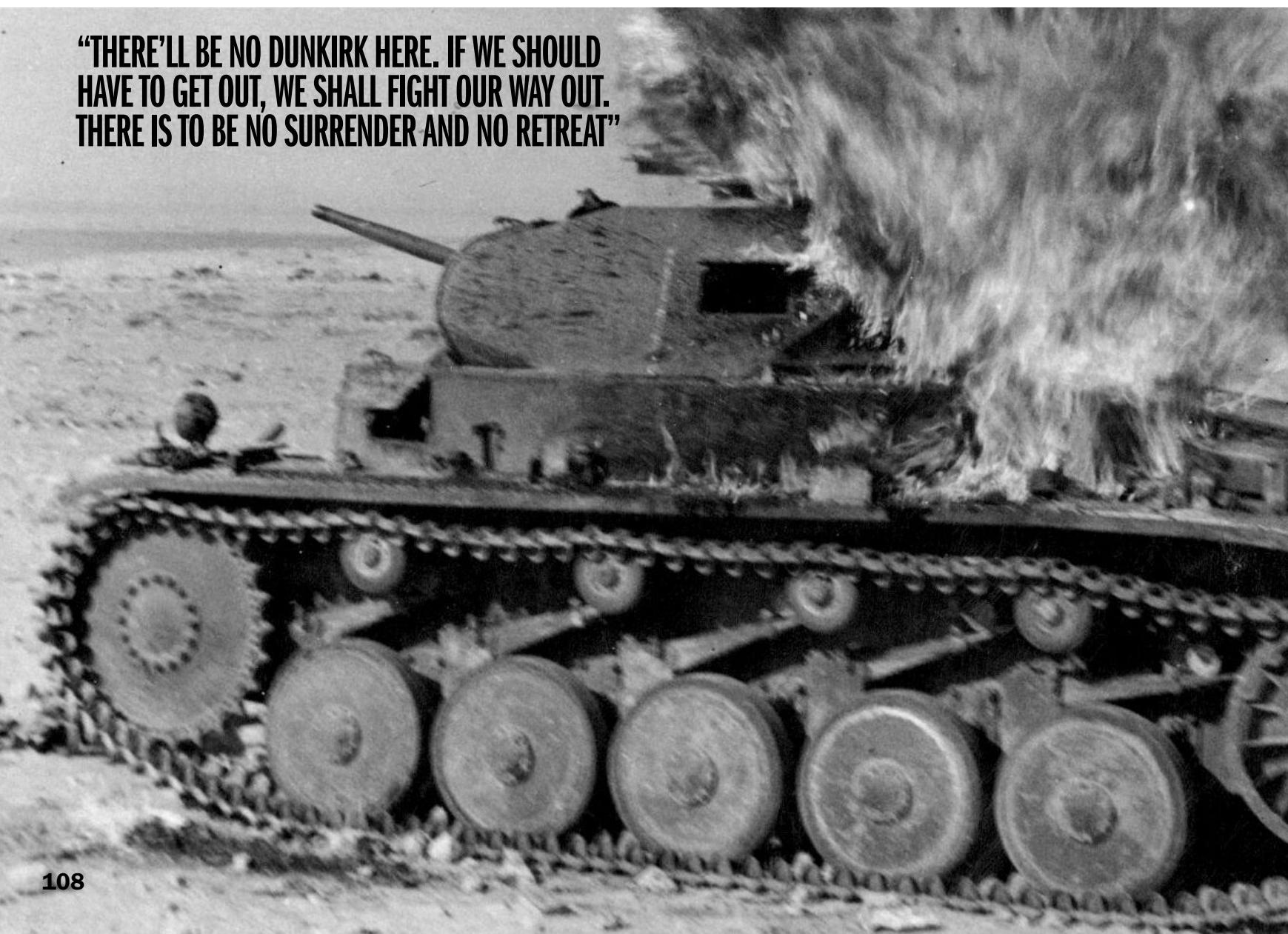
has time to dig in!" he told his lieutenants. On 24 March 1941 Rommel unleashed a lightning offensive that took the British by surprise. On the first day, his spearheads gobbled up El Agheila. Within two weeks, they had retaken Barce and Derna. Commonwealth forces fled. German columns rolled onto the coastal plain near Gazala and executed flanking movements to trap enemy troops as they retired. To compound the misery, both O'Connor and General Philip Neame were captured before dawn on 7 April, depriving the British of two highly capable commanders.

Located 120 kilometres (75 miles) west of the Egyptian border, Tobruk offered the Germans a deep water port roughly 430 kilometres (265 miles) east of Benghazi – a forward base of supply that might facilitate a masterstroke into the heart of Egypt, perhaps all the way to Cairo and the strategically vital Suez Canal. If Tobruk remained in Commonwealth possession, it would constitute a thorn in Rommel's side, a conduit for potential resupply of troops and equipment that would threaten his rear, while the German supply lines would be appreciably lengthened across the desert.

Although initially on their heels, the British, Australian and Indian soldiers of the renamed XIII Corps, and later the New Zealanders, Poles and Czechs brought into the fray,



**"THERE'LL BE NO DUNKIRK HERE. IF WE SHOULD HAVE TO GET OUT, WE SHALL FIGHT OUR WAY OUT. THERE IS TO BE NO SURRENDER AND NO RETREAT"**





*German soldiers, two carrying machine guns over their shoulders, move to a new position during the eight-month siege of Tobruk*



*Molotov Cocktails rapidly set ablaze. a German tank.*

realised to a man the importance of Tobruk. Wavell gathered his subordinate officers at a hotel on the city's waterfront on 8 April and told them frankly, "Tobruk must be held. There is nothing between you and Cairo."

Commanded by Australian General Leslie Morshead, nicknamed 'Ming the Merciless' by his men after the villain of the *Flash Gordon* radio and comic strip series, the 23,000 defenders of Tobruk consisted of elements of several Australian infantry brigades, including the 26th, the 18th and 24th, which had escaped encirclement by the Germans at Derna during their retreat, and the 20th Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division, along with the 18th Brigade of the 7th Division. These troops were bolstered by the 25-pounder (11.5-kilogram) artillery of the 1st/104th Essex Yeomanry and 107th South Nottingham Hussars of the Royal Horse Artillery, the 51st Field Regiment Royal Artillery, along with the 18th Indian Cavalry, the 1st Battalion, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, the antitank guns of the 2/3rd Australian Antitank Regiment and the 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery, as well as assorted anti-aircraft units. To counter Rommel's Panzerkampfwagen III and IV tanks, the battered remnants of the British 2nd Armoured Division mustered 22 tanks – a mixed bag of Matilda IIs and Cruiser Mk. I, Mk. II and Mk. IIIs.

Morshead made the most of the defences at Tobruk, positioning more than 40 of his big guns so that they could fire over the defensive perimeter at any point without moving. He repurposed Italian coastal guns, turning them inland. The defensive perimeter extended roughly 48 kilometres (30 miles), and the outer band, designated the Red Line, stretched 13 to 16 kilometres (eight to ten miles) from the inner port. It was constructed with an antitank ditch and an extensive minefield that was laced with barbed wire entanglements. At least 150 strongpoints dotted the defences, including those originally constructed by the Italians and improved by the new occupants. Many of these were concrete reinforced bunkers bristling with Vickers machine guns and Bren guns. Morshead also utilised a network of fortified caves. Early in the siege, he had air support from Hawker Hurricane fighters of

No. 72 Squadron and intelligence from the observation planes of No. 6 Squadron, RAF.

As the Germans approached, Morshead was resolute. Referring to the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from continental Europe a year earlier, he bluntly stated, "There'll be no Dunkirk here. If we should have to get out, we shall fight our way out. There is to be no surrender and no retreat."

The Afrika Korps vanguard roared into the vicinity of Tobruk on 10 April 1941. Intending to maintain his momentum, Rommel made a tactical error, failing to appreciate the strength of the port city's defences. Originally, he had intended to sweep eastwards and surround Tobruk before initiating a direct assault. Upon arrival, he determined that such a preparatory movement was unnecessary and immediately ordered the 15th Panzer Division, under General Heinrich von Prittwitz und Gaffron, to attack directly from the west. This assault was roughly handled and Prittwitz was killed.

Reconsidering his initial plan, Rommel executed the flanking movement early on 11 April, investing Tobruk with an array of firepower. In the east, south and west, he positioned the 5th Light Division, 15th Panzer Division and the Brescia Division respectively. The remaining Italian infantry divisions and the sole Italian armoured division, Ariete, were held in reserve.

Shortly after noon that day, the storm opened up again on Tobruk as the 5th Panzer Regiment hit the Australian 20th Brigade west of the El Adem road and lost five tanks before grinding to a halt. In the late afternoon, separate infantry attacks involving 1,100 soldiers failed to make gains. A second attack was supported by both German and Italian tanks, with several falling victim to antitank defences and four counterattacking British tanks. As daylight waned, the Axis forces pulled back after sustaining significant casualties. Rommel had once again been frustrated, having written to his wife Lucie at home in Germany that he was confident of victory: "Dear Lu, today may well see the end of the Battle of Tobruk."

Instead, it was merely the bloody beginning. Rommel licked his wounds and two days later sent the 5th Light Division forward at dusk against the 8th Machine Gun Battalion. The

## "TOBRUK MUST BE HELD. THERE IS NOTHING BETWEEN YOU AND CAIRO"

– Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell

Allied soldiers observe Axis artillery fire

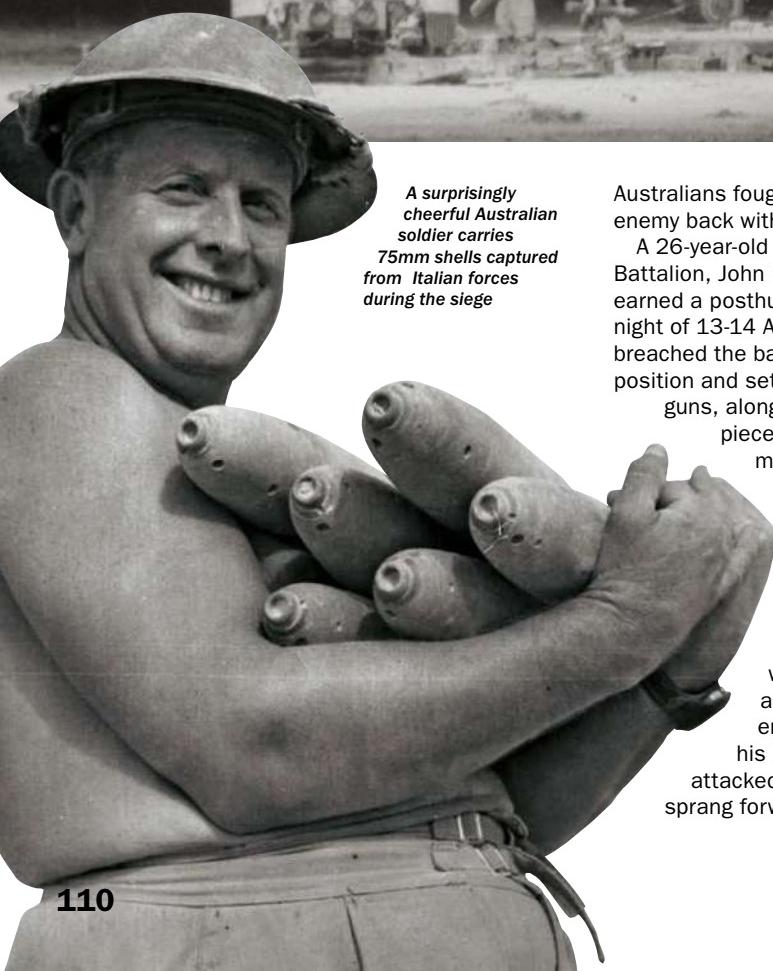


**"ONE GROUP OF INDIAN ARMY SOLDIERS RETURNED FROM A NOCTURNAL FORAY WITH TWO BAGS THAT HELD 32 SEVERED EARS. ANOTHER PATROL FORCED AN ENTIRE BATTALION OF ELITE ITALIAN BERSAGLIERI TO SURRENDER"**

*Anti-aircraft guns illuminate the desert night, 1941*



*A surprisingly cheerful Australian soldier carries 75mm shells captured from Italian forces during the siege*



Australians fought desperately and threw the enemy back with heavy casualties.

A 26-year-old corporal of the 2/17th Infantry Battalion, John Hurst 'Jack' Edmondson, earned a posthumous Victoria Cross on the night of 13-14 April. As German infantry breached the barbed wire obstacle near his position and set up half a dozen machine guns, along with mortars and artillery pieces, Edmondson and six others mounted a bayonet charge against the enemy. As he ran forward, Edmondson took wounds in the neck and stomach but refused to halt. He killed a German soldier with his bayonet.

Moments later, the officer who led the group had impaled another German, but the enemy soldier continued to grip his legs. As a second German attacked the officer, Edmondson sprang forward, killed both Germans and

saved his officer's life. The first Australian to receive the VC in World War II, Edmondson died of his wounds within hours.

Despite the young soldier's heroics, the Australians were compelled to fall back an hour later under the weight of an attack by 200 German soldiers, who managed to penetrate the Red Line temporarily. Rommel, however, had been forced to divert troops from another sector to fight Edmondson's unit, and the attacking troops were pulled back. German tanks were subjected to murderous fire during the withdrawal, and several were destroyed by antitank guns that had been camouflaged.

The defenders of Tobruk took heavy losses as well. Every inch of their position was within range of German and Italian artillery. The Luftwaffe was a continuing threat as Junkers Ju-87 'Stuka' dive bombers screamed down in near-vertical dives to deliver their lethal payloads. "They timed their run to coincide with the position of the sun so that they were on us before we could really see them," remembered one veteran of the





**Above:** A brigadier gives instructions to tank commanders, November 1941



**Above:** Allied soldiers using a captured Breda anti-aircraft gun during the siege of Tobruk, May 1941

German forces fighting outside Tobruk. The siege slowly sapped Axis strength, finally compelling them to halt offensive operations and later to withdraw



## "WHAT WITH THE BANSHEE BLOOD-CURDLING SCREAM OF DIVING AIRCRAFT, THE ANTI-AIRCRAFT BARRAGE AND EXPLODING BOMBS, IT WAS A NERVE-RACKING EXPERIENCE"

siege. "What with the banshee blood-curdling scream of diving aircraft, the anti-aircraft barrage and exploding bombs, it was a nerve-racking experience."

After Nazi propagandists referred to Tobruk's beleaguered defenders as rats caught in a trap, the defenders began calling themselves the 'Rats of Tobruk'. They endured tremendous privations. Food and water were always in short supply. Clouds of black flies and mosquitoes plagued them. Lice and fleas tormented them during fitful attempts to sleep. The men were tired and ragged but full of fight, so decided to mete out some terror of their own. In addition to a robust defence, they regularly slipped past the German lines at night, sometimes in patrols of up to 20, slitting throats, setting booby traps, blowing up ammunition dumps and generally creating chaos. One group of Indian Army soldiers returned from a nocturnal foray with two bags that held 32 severed ears. Another patrol forced an entire battalion of elite Italian Bersaglieri to surrender.

Meanwhile, Rommel pounded away at the Red Line, and General Friedrich Paulus arrived at the behest of high command to observe operations and hopefully quell Rommel's penchant for ignoring orders. In the predawn hours of 14 April, the Germans tried to crack the nut that was Tobruk yet again, but the result was a rebuff. Following artillery and Stuka strikes, tanks rumbled forward as the 5th Panzer Regiment managed to stake out a small lodgement at the El Adem road three kilometres (two miles) inside the Red Line.

Unaware that they had been coaxed into a trap, the German tankers pressed forward, past the quiet Australian defences. The German infantry followed, but as they passed the defenders erupted with every weapon at hand. Assailed from both flanks, the advance turned quickly into a rout. Antitank fire was pressed home from short range, in some instances from only 550 metres (600 yards). British artillery barked and machine guns clattered. Crusader tanks, dug in for protection, blasted away. By the time the

Germans backed out of the meat grinder, 16 of 36 tanks were destroyed and dozens of infantrymen were dead or wounded.

Rommel's frustration boiled over as one tank commander referred to the fight as a "witch's cauldron" and muttered that he had been fortunate to escape alive. The Desert Fox refocused, swinging his attacks to the west. At 5.30pm on 15 April, he sent 1,000 Italian troops forward against the Australian 2nd Battalion, 24th Brigade. The attack made good initial progress, compelling the defenders to retreat from forward positions, but reinforcing infantry and the steady fire of the 51st Field Regiment caused the attack to peter out. The following night, Italian infantry of the 1st Battalion, 62nd Trento Regiment attacked near Acroma. When the tank commanders of the Ariete Division refused to advance and remained hull-down in a wadi, Rommel was incensed. But the armour stayed put. 800 Italian infantrymen were cut off and captured.

Still pricking the enemy's thumb, Morshead ordered a pair of raids on the night of 22 April.

Crewmen aboard a British tank watch a long line of Axis prisoners march into captivity during the 241-day siege of Tobruk



Allied tankers and their vehicles lined up in the desert, Tobruk, 1941

They bagged nearly 450 German and Italian prisoners near the Ras El Madauar area in the southwest perimeter.

Rommel regrouped for more than a week. Then, on 30 April, he unleashed a powerful attack against the western perimeter near Ras el Madauar. His first objective was Point 209, an observation post for the guns of the 51st Field Regiment. German troops of the fresh 104th Rifle Regiment joined Italians of the Brescia Division at dusk, breaching the perimeter and taking Point 209 about five hours later. Several strongpoints fell to the onslaught, and by daylight on 1 May the Desert Fox had ordered tanks into the gap in the British line. The armour split into two columns, right to support the Brescia Division and left to attack the 51st Field Regiment's gun emplacements at Wadi Giaida.

Bucking up against the major threat, the reserve company of the 2/24th Battalion stepped up with an antitank gun company in support. As the Australians fired briskly, the German tanks ran into a minefield. For more than two hours they were trapped under heavy artillery fire. Although several strongpoints were overrun, others stood firm. Morshead ordered an afternoon counterattack, but several tanks were disabled and the 2/48th Battalion took heavy casualties. Rommel conceded his deepest penetration but maintained control of a five-kilometre (three-mile) salient into the Red Line, at a cost of 46 of the 81 tanks employed, either to mechanical breakdowns or enemy fire.

While a sandstorm limited operations on 2 May, Morshead reinforced his defences around the German penetration. Subsequent counterattacks by the 18th Brigade failed to dislodge them, and the salient remained intact as Rommel came to grips with the failure to take Tobruk by direct attack, settling further into siege mode. Rommel began to plan offensive operations further east as Paulus advised him against another attempt to take Tobruk. A flurry of messages from Berlin

warned Rommel not to attack Tobruk again or undertake offensive operations for the foreseeable future. The failure of the attack of 30 April-1 May, among the first major setbacks for the German army in WWII, ended the immediate threat to Tobruk. The succeeding months were largely consumed with artillery bombardment, raids and periods of inactivity.

Winston Churchill and General Wavell were both encouraged by the defence of Tobruk, and the prime minister urged him to attempt a relief effort. Operation Brevity was launched on 15 May as British troops advanced from defensive positions along the Egyptian frontier. Heavy fighting erupted as each side vied for control of Halfaya Pass near the port town of Sollum. The British took control of the area, nicknamed 'Hellfire Pass', but were driven back, and the offensive was called off.

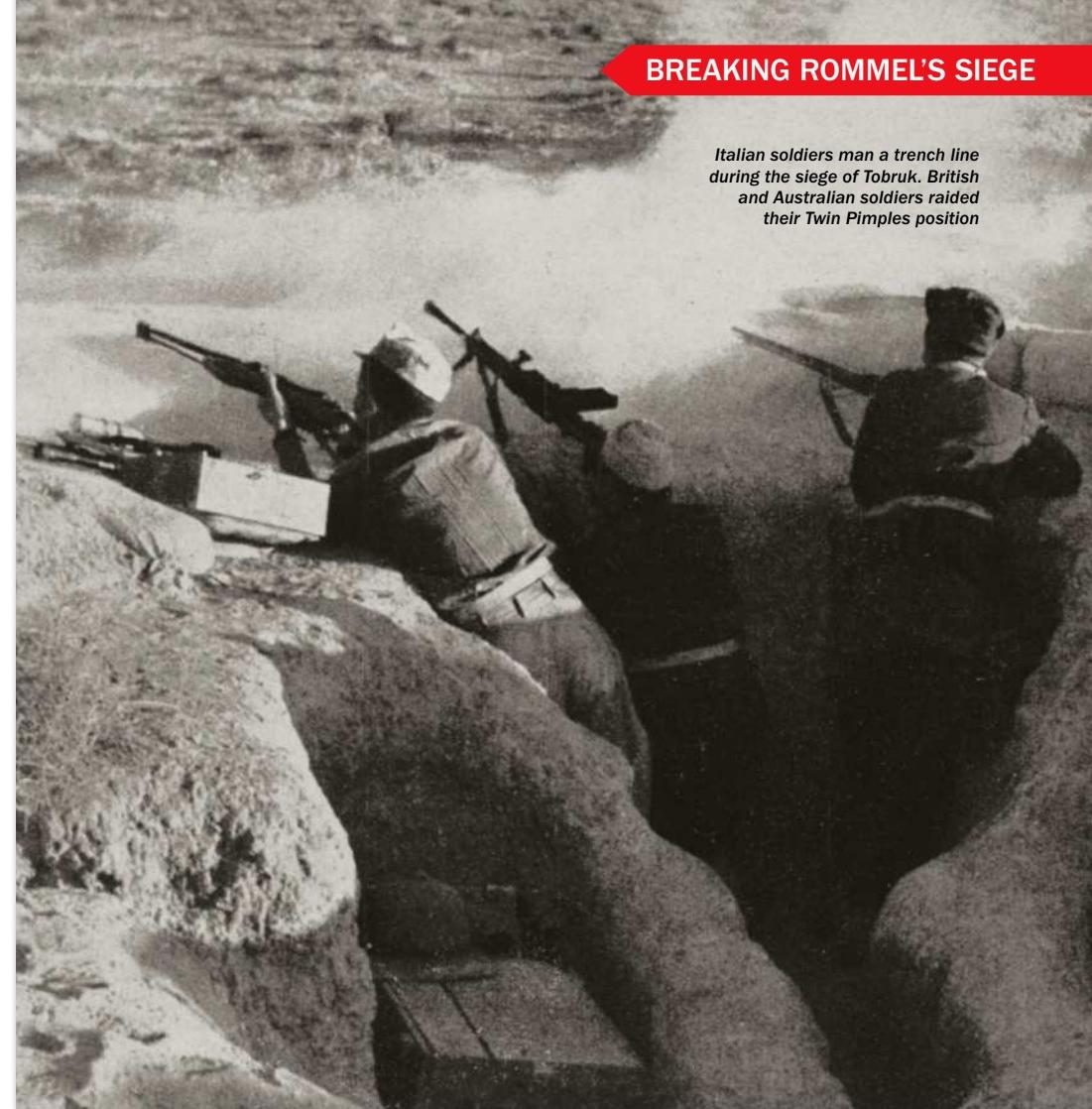
A month later, Wavell launched a second relief attempt, Operation Battleaxe, which was a dismal failure. British armoured tactics were woefully inadequate, and accurate fire from the highly effective German 88mm guns – originally anti-aircraft weapons innovatively employed in an antitank role – took a heavy toll. During three days of fighting, the British lost 45 Crusader tanks, 27 Cruiser tanks and 64 Matilda IIs. On the heels of the debacle, Wavell was informed that he was being replaced by General Claude Auchinleck.

At the same time, a political crisis occurred in Australia as the government of Prime Minister Robert Menzies was toppled and the new leadership clamoured for the withdrawal of Australian troops from Tobruk to rejoin their comrades in other areas. The Australians were replaced by the British 70th Division, the Polish Carpathian Brigade and the Czech 11th Battalion between August and October.

Since the fighting had begun in April, the defenders of Tobruk had suffered heavily. Incessant Luftwaffe air attacks were hazardous to shipping that brought much-needed supplies and reinforcements into the harbour. Artillery pounded their positions relentlessly. Still, they had clung to their posts and parried each of Rommel's thrusts.

By late November, with the siege in its seventh month, the recently constituted British Eighth Army initiated Operation Crusader, an offensive intended to relieve Tobruk and destroy Axis armour in the process. On 18 November, British and German tanks clashed in a driving rain at Sidi Rezegh about 16 kilometres (ten miles) southeast of the Red Line. Repeated engagements sapped Rommel's strength, and a battle on 7 December, in which the 4th Armoured Brigade knocked out 11 tanks of the 15th Panzer Division, was indicative of the losses the Afrika Korps was regularly absorbing.

Resupply was becoming problematic for the Germans and Italians, and Rommel reluctantly withdrew to Gazala. On 10 December, elements of Eighth Army marched into Tobruk in triumph. The great siege had been costly, the Allies losing nearly 4,000 killed, wounded and captured, and the Axis forces approximately twice that number. For the Desert Fox, the setback was only temporary. Within months he returned to Tobruk with a vengeance.



Italian soldiers man a trench line during the siege of Tobruk. British and Australian soldiers raided their Twin Pimples position

## THE TWIN PIMPLES RAID

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK IN THE SUMMER OF 1941, THE DEFENDING COMMONWEALTH COMMAND MAINTAINED HIGH MORALE & STRUCK SMALL-SCALE BLOWS AGAINST THE INVESTING AXIS FORCES UNDER GENERAL ERWIN ROMMEL

One of the most successful raids occurred on the night of 17-18 July, when elements of No. 8 Guards Commando and the Royal Australian Engineers executed an assault against an Italian strongpoint outside the Tobruk perimeter, identified as the Twin Pimples.

The Twin Pimples raid serves as an excellent example of timing, execution and cooperation. The terrain feature derived its name from a pair of hills located close together and occupied by the Italians. The 18th King Edward's Own Cavalry held the Tobruk line directly opposite, and a raid involving three officers and 40 soldiers of No. 8 Commando was organised to cross a supply road in front of the Italian positions and attack the high ground from behind.

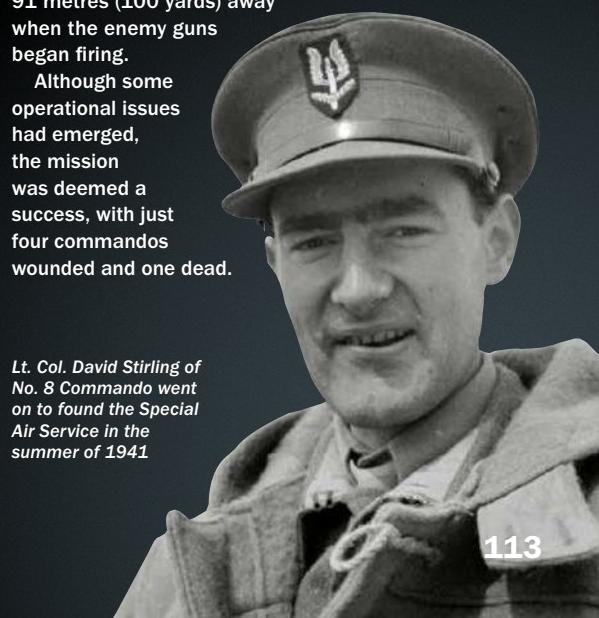
The commandos set off at 11pm and crossed in front of the enemy post undetected. Under cover, they waited for two hours before the 18th Cavalry Regiment executed a diversionary attack. When the Italians were alerted to the diversion, their positions erupted in small-arms fire, and flares lit the night sky. The subsequent commando advance was undetected until the attackers were within 27

metres (30 yards) of the Twin Pimples. Swiftly, the commandos took the Italian positions, and the engineers moved in to plant explosives at several mortar emplacements while also destroying an ammunition dump. Planners had estimated that supporting Italian positions would require 15 minutes before their artillery came into action, and the commandos were roughly 91 metres (100 yards) away when the enemy guns began firing.

Although some operational issues had emerged, the mission was deemed a success, with just four commandos wounded and one dead.

Lt. Col. David Stirling of No. 8 Commando went on to found the Special Air Service in the summer of 1941

Images: Alamy, Getty



SICILY, JULY - AUGUST 1943

SICILY, JULY - AUGUST 1943

# THE ASSAULT ON FORTRESS EUROPE

A year before the invasion of Normandy, Operation Husky struck the first major blow on Axis soil, with thousands of troops battling against challenging conditions. Here, historian and broadcaster James Holland recounts how the Allies triumphed during this astonishing but often overlooked campaign

WORDS JAMES HOLLAND





In terms of men landed in a single day, Operation Husky, the Allied assault of Sicily on 10 July 1943, remains the largest amphibious invasion ever mounted in the history of the world. More than 160,000 American, British and Canadian troops were dropped from the sky or came ashore that day, more than on D-Day in Normandy just under a year later, or in any of the island battles in the Pacific. It was a remarkable achievement and all the more so since Britain and America had, just three years earlier, almost no armies to speak of and almost no tanks, guns, trucks and other essential equipment. In many ways, the Battle of Sicily is the moment the Western Allies came of age. It was on Sicily that the British and American coalition began to operate at a war-winning level. Modern warfare by 1943, said General Sir Harold Alexander, commander of all Allied land forces for Sicily, was a correlation of "the three elements we live in: land, air, water. Army, air force and navy must become a brotherhood". At the time, it was only the Western Allies who were bringing these three elements together and it was to bring about a sea change in how they fought. Air power, especially, was a vital part of the pre-invasion operations on and around Sicily and continued to play a critical part throughout the campaign.

The 36-day Battle for Sicily is an extraordinary story. Its conquest involved the largest airborne operations ever witnessed up to that point, daring raids by special forces, the harnessing of the Mafia, attacks across mosquito-infested plains, assaults up almost sheer faces of

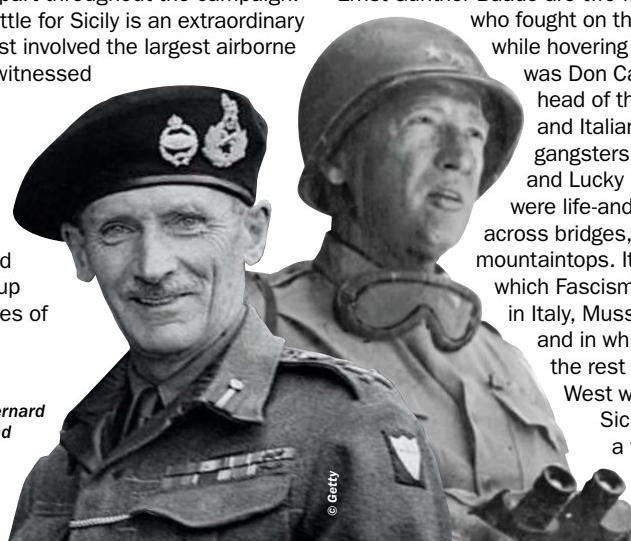
**Left to right:** Field Marshall General Bernard Law Montgomery and General George Patton



US paratroopers being transported to the Allied assault on Sicily

rock and scrub, and featured an astonishing array of highly colourful characters, from commanders such as Generals Montgomery and Patton to the German Valentin Hube – nicknamed 'der Mann' – as well as a host of lesser ranked officers and soldiers, such as Lord Tweedsmuir, the son of John Buchan, Philip Mountbatten, later to become the Duke of Edinburgh, England cricketer Hedley Verity; the legendary Luftwaffe pilot 'Mackay' Steinhoff and the kilt and claymore-wearing Ernst-Günther Baade are two fascinating men who fought on the German side, while hovering in the background was Don Calo Vizzini, the head of the Sicilian Mafia, and Italian-American gangsters Vito Genovese and Lucky Luciano. There were life-and-death struggles across bridges, plains and mountaintops. It was a period in which Fascism was overthrown in Italy, Mussolini was toppled, and in which the pattern for the rest of the war in the West was set.

Sicily was, though, a terrible place to fight a battle and especially



Troops from 51st Highland Division unloading stores from landing craft on the opening day of the Allied invasion of Sicily



in the blazing heat of high summer. A Baedeker guide from the 1930s warned that no tourist should consider visiting in the months of July and August, when temperatures were blistering and conditions at their worst – and yet this was precisely when the Sicilian campaign took place. Certainly, it was a brutal campaign in many ways. The violence was extreme, the heat unbearable, the stench of rotting corpses intense and all-pervasive, and the problems of malaria, dysentery and other diseases were a constant plague that affected all trying to fight their way across this island of limited infrastructure, rocky hills, mountains and an all-dominating volcano. Endless dust, dry throats and thirst were constant companions to all those fighting on Sicily.

At the time, the campaign was the biggest battle being fought in the West and was on the front pages of newspapers and headlining news footage across Europe and the United States. The eyes of the West were on this Italian island as were those of Nazi Germany. Today it is largely forgotten about, overtaken in the narrative by the battles for Cassino and more especially by D-Day, Normandy and the war in northwest Europe.

The Sicilian campaign also marked a period of dramatic change in the fortunes and tempo of the Second World War, which marked the end of the Italian participation as an Axis ally, forcing Nazi Germany to considerably extend its active participation on its southern front, as well as witnessing the first major amphibious operation of the war against a defended coastline, and the first coalition operation between the United States and Britain in which

## "THE CAMPAIGN WAS THE BIGGEST BATTLE BEING FOUGHT IN THE WEST AND WAS ON THE FRONT PAGES OF NEWSPAPERS AND HEADLINING NEWS"

both nations fielded entire armies each. A major campaign with far-reaching strategic importance, it was also an important lesson learning exercise before Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944.

The decision by the Allies to invade Sicily was made at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, a meeting between British and American war leaders to thrash out a strategy to win the war in the West. By this time, they knew they must surely win in North Africa, and although it had been agreed they would attempt a cross-Channel invasion of France the following year, in May 1944, there were very good reasons for invading Sicily: it would mean Allied troops would once more be back on European soil, it would help hustle Italy out of the war (if North Africa did not achieve that strategic goal), and it would further tighten the noose around Nazi Germany. In North Africa and the Mediterranean, considerable forces had been built up and they could not sit back and do nothing until the following May.

Complex deception plans were mounted, with a number of sabotage operations in Greece to help point to a landing there, and

also Operation Mincemeat. Despite all the drama and intrigue of this highly complex operation, which suggested the Allies were going to invade Sardinia and Greece, simple logic pointed to Sicily. Certainly, this was what Mussolini and the Italian war leaders thought, and was also what Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, the German commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean also believed. It was true that Hitler accepted the ruse because it conformed with what he believed were the Allies' intentions and reinforced his paranoia about the vulnerability of the Balkans and especially the Ploesti oilfields in Romania, Germany's only source of real, rather than synthetic, oil. In other words, Mincemeat made little, if any, difference.

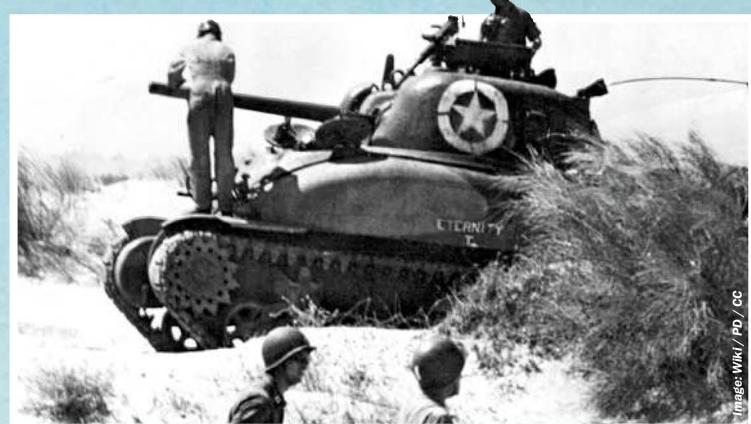
That Sicily was the obvious next target was because command of the air over the invasion front was a prerequisite for any amphibious invasion. This meant not only having bombers available but also fighter aircraft too, flying protective high cover. Allied air bases on Malta and in northern Tunisia meant this could be only effectively achieved over Sicily; Sardinia and Greece were simply too far away.

Planning for Husky began immediately after the Casablanca conference, even though the British Eighth and First Armies (which included US II Corps) were still battling through Tunisia. The planning team established itself in Room 141 of the St George's Hotel in Algiers and was known as 'Force 141'. By the time a plan for the assault was finally agreed, it had already gone through eight different variations. The ninth plan was what was accepted, on Easter Day in April 1943.

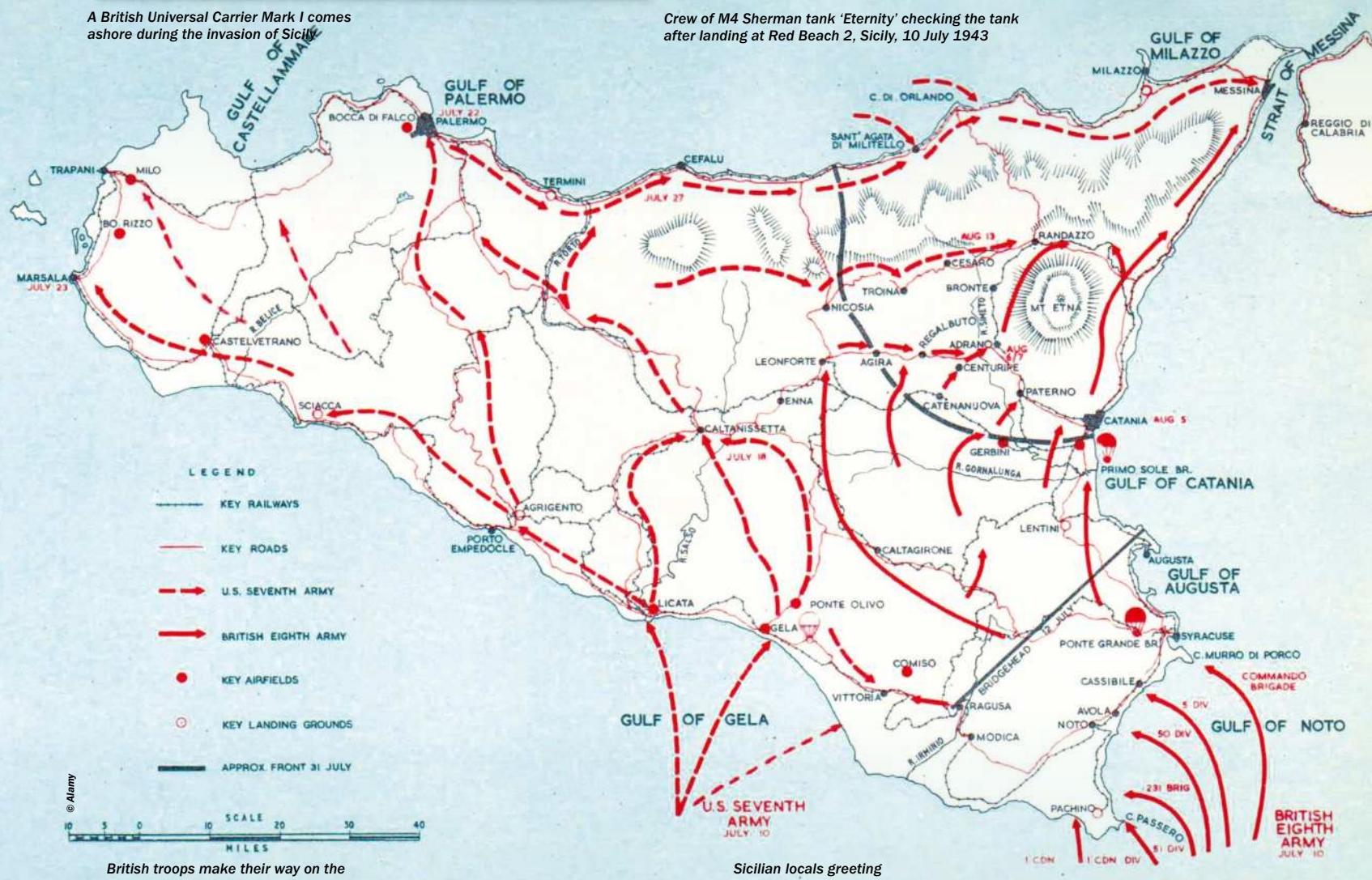




A British Universal Carrier Mark I comes ashore during the invasion of Sicily



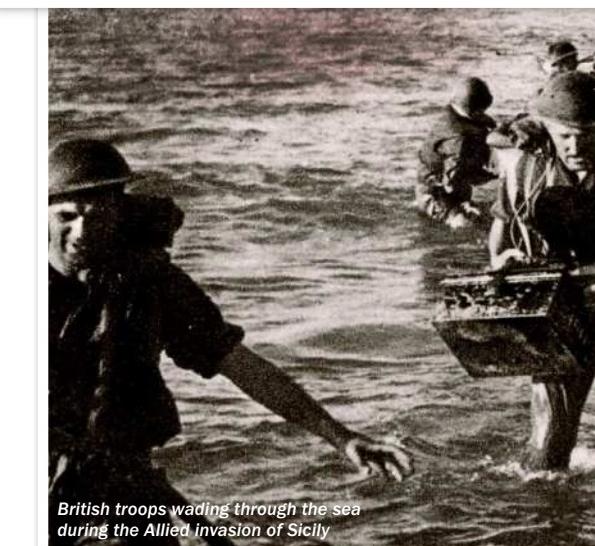
Crew of M4 Sherman tank 'Eternity' checking the tank after landing at Red Beach 2, Sicily, 10 July 1943



British troops make their way on the beach using landing craft



Image: James Holland



Husky was a mind-bogglingly complex operation and drawn up while having absolutely no idea what the enemy reaction might be, and while the commanders were still busy fighting the war in North Africa. This was not like Overlord, when the Allies had a fairly clear picture of what German troops were defending France and where they were based; at the time of planning for Sicily, both German and Italian units were still fighting in Tunisia and would continue to do so until 13 May, a month after the final plans for Husky were submitted. Even then, it was still unclear what German units might be sent to Sicily. Italian forces were expected to be weak although they had to be prepared for them to fight harder since they would now be doing so on Italian soil. The Germans, they knew, would fight determinedly and be absolutely no push-over.

The shape of Sicily and the location of airfields and ports was another thorny matter. It was estimated Allied forces would need 6,000 tons of supplies per day but the biggest port, Messina, which could handle 2,500 tons a day, was the most heavily defended and furthest away. Palermo could handle 2,000 tons a day but was in the northwest, while Catania could manage 2,000 tons but was halfway up the east coast. The airfields were in the centre of the island on the Catania Plain or in the far west or southeast, so at opposite ends of the island. Really, the Allies needed to swarm the entire island but that wasn't ever going to be possible.

Air power, however, was viewed as absolutely vital and Air Chief Marshal Tedder, the commander of Allied Air Forces in the Mediterranean, wanted troops to swiftly capture the airfields on the west, south and southeast all at once. On the other hand, the Army wanted to land on as narrow a front as possible and quickly build up supplies from

there. In other words, the differing Allied forces had entirely contradictory requirements. It was a conundrum that had to be solved.

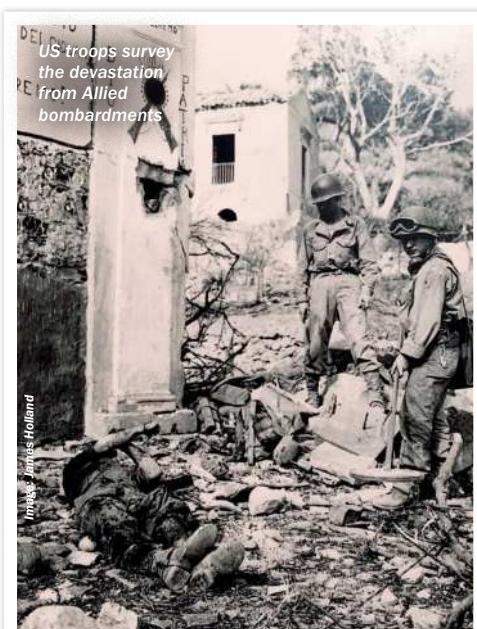
In the end, a compromise was agreed. The British would land on the southeast coast and head straight to the ports of Syracuse, Augusta and then Catania, and from there on to Messina as quickly as possible. Landing on the eastern side made more sense because Messina – and the supply route for the Axis forces from mainland Italy – lay on the northeastern side of the island. The Canadians would land on the southeast tip, while the Americans would land on the central southern stretch around Gela. It meant the airfields there and on the southeast could be captured swiftly, but not those in the west. Air power alone would have to deal with those.

Second guessing the German and Italian defences and the reaction to an invasion was part of the planning process. The single most

important factor at this stage of the war was to ensure the landings were successful – or rather, that they did not fail. There could be no reverses. Not failing trumped every other factor. It also meant that General Alexander agreed with Montgomery to land as many troops as possible to ensure a bridgehead was quickly established and no effective attempt to push them back into the sea could be mounted. That too, however, involved even more compromises, because for all the very impressive build-up of troops and supplies in the Mediterranean, there was still a limit to how much shipping and landing craft were available. Large numbers of troops could only be landed at the expense of large numbers of vehicles – the kind of vehicles that would then transport troops quickly up to Catania and beyond.

It was this decision that lay at the root of the subsequent slow advance inland. As events turned out, the British landings were easier than had been feared but then the troops had to march north on foot until transport could arrive in numbers over the following days. By that time, the Germans on Sicily had been reinforced, had regained their balance and resistance was, as a result, considerably stiffer. Consequently, front-loading the landings with troops was the wrong decision but only with hindsight. At the time, the very real jeopardy surrounding the operation and the risk of failure outweighed the necessity to move north towards Catania and Messina quickly.

It is also this perceived slowness of advance that has clouded the Allied effort in Sicily ever since. At the end of the campaign, nearly 40,000 German troops managed to successfully escape across the Straits on Messina and live to fight another day. This, too, has prompted considerable criticism and especially of Montgomery, the commander





*The carpet bombing of Castelvetrano*



*A Martin Baltimore flies over retreating German forces heading for Messina*

Images: James Holland



*Soldiers enjoy a well-earned break during the Allied invasion*



*US troops on patrol in the streets of the harbour city of Messina*

of Eighth Army and in charge of the British effort up the east coast.

Such criticism, however, has been badly misplaced. A very quick tour of the island and its myriad hilltop towns, wide, open valleys and narrow, winding roads is enough make any modern traveller marvel that the island was cleared of Axis troops in a mere 38 days. Throughout the campaign, the sun beat down with temperatures reaching as much as 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit). The dirt roads kicked up dust that could be seen for miles and which stuck in the throat and made men parched with thirst. Water was not safe to drink and water supply was a constant problem that troubled both sides. British troops caught in the Plain of Catania faced Germans dug in along the southern slopes of Etna and both sides lost more men to malaria than they did to bullet, mortar or artillery shell.

Inland, away from the beaches and the Plain of Catania, the island was rocky, mountainous and an extremely difficult place in which to move and especially so without being seen. The Germans, as they fell back, did so by taking one town after another. Because the only roads led from one summit to the next up winding, hairpin tracks, the Allies had little choice but to prise the defenders one town

and hilltop at a time. From the summit of each, the next could be seen, and the next after that. Assoro, Agira, Regalbuto, Troina and Centuripe – these ancient hilltop towns saw one Herculean struggle after another, in which the Allies were forced to literally inch their way forward yard by yard against an enemy who made each stand on land of his choosing and inevitably with the all-important advantage of height from which the advancing Allies could be seen. While it was left to the Allied infantry to doggedly plough on, their only solace was the fire support they received from the air but especially from the artillery, who pounded the Germans in their positions – invariably the hilltop towns. Each was pummelled into rubble, homes destroyed and the civilians killed, wounded or turned into refugees. Meanwhile, the Germans were struggling with ever-weakening air support and supply shortages, and declining morale as it became increasingly clear the island was lost. The battle being fought was one of buying time.

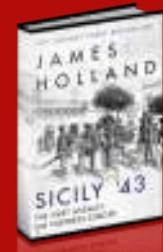
The Allies have also been criticised for allowing 39,569 Germans and 62,000 Italians to escape. However, the history of the war shows that evacuations were generally pretty successful. At Dunkirk, 338,000 Allied troops escaped; 42,000 out of 46,000 British troops deployed were evacuated from Greece.

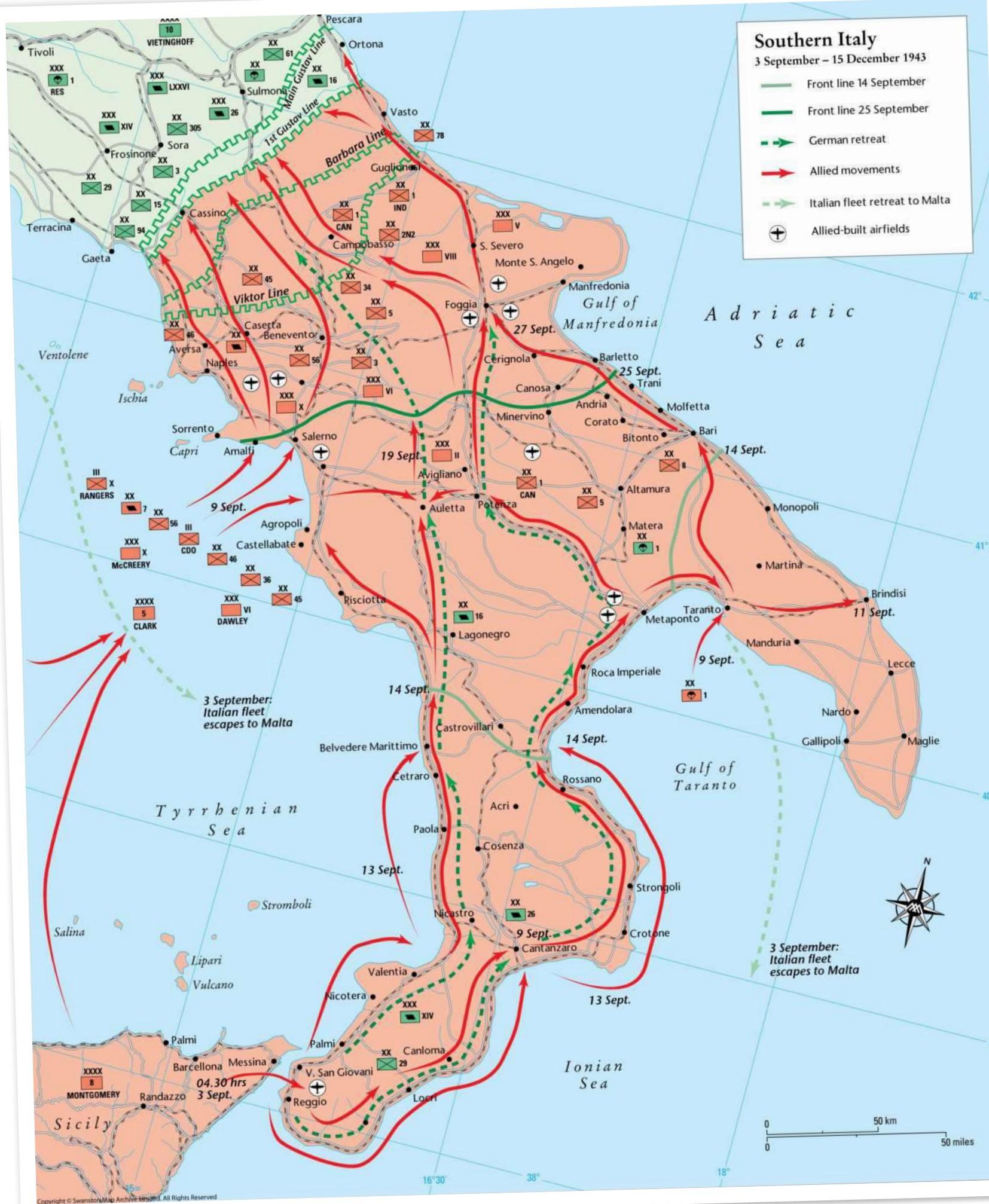
Nearly 19,000 of the 32,000 Allied troops on Crete were also evacuated. At the end of the war, more than two million Germans were successfully evacuated from East Prussia and Danzig at a time when the Red Army was bearing down upon them. None of these evacuations took place at such a short crossing point as the Straits of Messina, which was little more than a mile wide, nor at a spot that was more densely defended: there were 333 anti-aircraft guns either side of the straits (compared with 135 along the Normandy coast line the following summer). It was impossible to stop them and their escape made almost no difference to the subsequent Italian campaign that followed. Furthermore, of the nearly 40,000 Germans that escaped, less than 30,000 were fighting troops, barely two divisions and the each of the four divisions that had fought on Sicily had been appallingly mauled. Within a matter of months there would be 18 divisions fighting in Italy and some 24 by the following spring of 1944; those that escaped Sicily were hardly a decisive number.

Above all, Sicily 1943 was an epic of human drama of both combatants and civilians alike. For all those who fought, died and survived this bitter and bloody battle, it deserves to be far better known and understood today.

## FURTHER READING

James Holland has applied his own extensive studies of the battlefield and over three decades of research to tell the story of the immense Operation Husky. Sicily '43 is on sale 3 September and available from all good book shops and online retailers





*With troops diverted elsewhere, the Allies shipped in soldiers from North Africa, such as the Moroccan troops pictured*



ITALY, JULY 1943 - MAY 1945

# THE INVASION OF ITALY

Designed to leech Nazi troops and resources from both fronts, the Italian Campaign saw the Allies simultaneously crush the Italian Fascists, and deal Germany a series of critical blows

WORDS HARETH AL BUSTANI

**A**fter scoring their first major victory of the war in North Africa, securing the Suez Canal and Arabian Gulf oil supplies, the Allies were desperate to land the Axis a critical blow in the Mediterranean. Targeting what Churchill called the “soft underbelly of Europe”, they set their sights on Mussolini’s Italy, hoping to take the Italian fascists out of the war and force Turkey to support their efforts in the Balkans, paving the way for an invasion of Austria.

Even without a decisive victory, success in this theatre would tie Italian troops down in their own country and drag Axis forces away from the bloody conflict on the Eastern Front. It would also provide a strategic launching point for bombing raids and future operations in the heart of Western Europe.

Having fully mobilised its war machine, the United States wanted to focus its superior resources on a direct crossing of the Channel, landing in France and smashing Hitler from the west. However, it agreed to support the Italian invasion so long as it was free to withdraw troops as soon as they were needed elsewhere.

The Italian Campaign began with the Allied landing on Sicily, codenamed Operation Husky. It was a costly manoeuvre, with the Canadians alone losing three ships carrying troops from Britain to submarine attacks. On 10 July 1943, Allied troops poured across 105 miles of coastline, hitting 26 different beaches, with the Canadian 15th Army Group troops under General Sir Harold Alexander fighting alongside the British 8th Army led by General Sir Bernard Montgomery. Targeting a separate stretch, the 7th US Army was commandeered by General George Patton.

One of the largest seaborne operations in history, Husky saw almost 3,000 Allied ships and craft haul 180,000 troops to the Italian shore – even more than the later landing at Normandy. The Germans shored up the island’s defences, with heavy fighting in the mountains of Catania, but within four weeks, having scored the critical element of surprise, the Allies clawed hundreds of miles of land – securing the strategic island, and with it, the Mediterranean Sea.

Although the Germans were able to evacuate 60,000 troops to the Italian mainland, the Axis suffered 156,000 casualties in the fighting – mostly Italians. Isolated and defeated, the Italians overthrew Mussolini and surrendered, but Germany refused to let the Italian peninsula go and invaded, setting up mainland Italy as a decisive battlefield.

The Nazis occupied several strategic positions across Italy, hoping to make the Allied advance

north as painful as possible. Undeterred, on 3 September, the British 8th Army crossed the Strait of Messina to reach the 'toe' of the boot of Italy. Their advance was slowed by the retreating Germans' use of mines, booby-traps and demolitions.

Less than a week later, US General Mark Clark's 5th Army hit the beaches south of Salerno, where they were mired in heavy fighting with the Germans. Simultaneously, the British 1st Airborne Division targeted Taranto, the 'heel' of Italy – a multi-pronged attack that allowed the Allies to close in on Naples by the end of the month.

After the Battle of Salerno, the Germans planned to flee to the north and defend the line running from Pisa to Rimini, which the Allies would have to attempt to outflank by sea to break through and reach the Po plains. However, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring convinced Hitler to let him try to hold a line further south, between Rome and Naples. General Erwin Rommel, who was stationed in the north, sent down two infantry divisions and some artillery, before being shipped off to France – keeping the Allies mired down in a distant battle, so the liberated Mussolini could rule over a larger puppet state.

Over the winter, Hitler ordered his forces to hold a series of defensive positions south of Rome, running from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Adriatic, through the mountains. Kesselring developed a series of defensive lines spanning southern Italy, each intersecting northeast from the western Tyrrhenian Sea to the eastern Adriatic. These included the Volturno Line, spanning the Volturno River in the west and Biferno to the east; the Barbara Line, trailing the Trigno River in the east; and then several others centred on the mighty Gustav Line, running from the mouth of the Garigliano River in the west to that of the



*German soldiers defend the mighty Monte Cassino monastery, from the ruins of a bombed out tower*

Sangro River in the east. At the heart of this was the formidable mountain monastery of Monte Cassino – which blocked the entrance to the more open Liri Valley.

After initially expecting an easy path to Rome, on 7 October, Eisenhower told the Combined Chiefs of Staff the road would be "hard and bitter". However, the Allies pressed on; choosing a route that would take them along Highway 6 – the Rome-Naples Highway – through Monte Cassino. Capped by a Benedictine monastery, at the bottom of the mountain stood a small town, fringed by two rivers. If they could surpass this point, they would break through to the Liri Valley, opening out through the Alban Hills to Rome itself.

Fighting across the first few lines, the Allies battled with German defensive positions laid out along natural geographic strongholds; rivers and mountains. Like the horrors of World War I, they

had to break through these positions, reinforced with machine guns, barbed wire, land mines and artillery, using multi-pronged setpiece attacks.

After crossing the Volturno, Barbara and Bernhardt Lines, with all routes to Gustav under control, the Allies formed the 15th Army Group under General Alexander. The Group was split between the British 8th Army, now under General Leese, and the US 5th, under General Mark Clarke. Having lost several of their most elite units, and withdrawn seven, the Allies started shipping in French, Moroccan and Algerian replacements, trained in North Africa.

Facing an overwhelming network of fortifications, the Allies focused their spearhead on the eastern end of the Gustav Line, picking away at the River Sangro, before crossing over, with the Canadians taking the castle town of Ortona in December. With Ortona's

## THE ITALIAN RESISTANCE

Lesser known than their French counterparts, the Italian partisans provoked a bloody response from their Nazi occupiers

After the Italian surrender, as invasion reached a stalemate along the Gothic Line, tensions flared among the northern Italians living under the German fascist puppet state, the Italian Social Republic. Allied special forces offered assistance and arms to pro-Allied Italian partisans, sabotaging enemy supply and communication lines.

On March 23 1944, the 25th anniversary of the foundation of Mussolini's Fascist movement, a column of Order Police was hit by a series of explosions as they marched down Rome's Via Rasella, killing 33 and wounding 100. The attacks were orchestrated by 17 members of the Communist-aligned Patriotic Action Group.

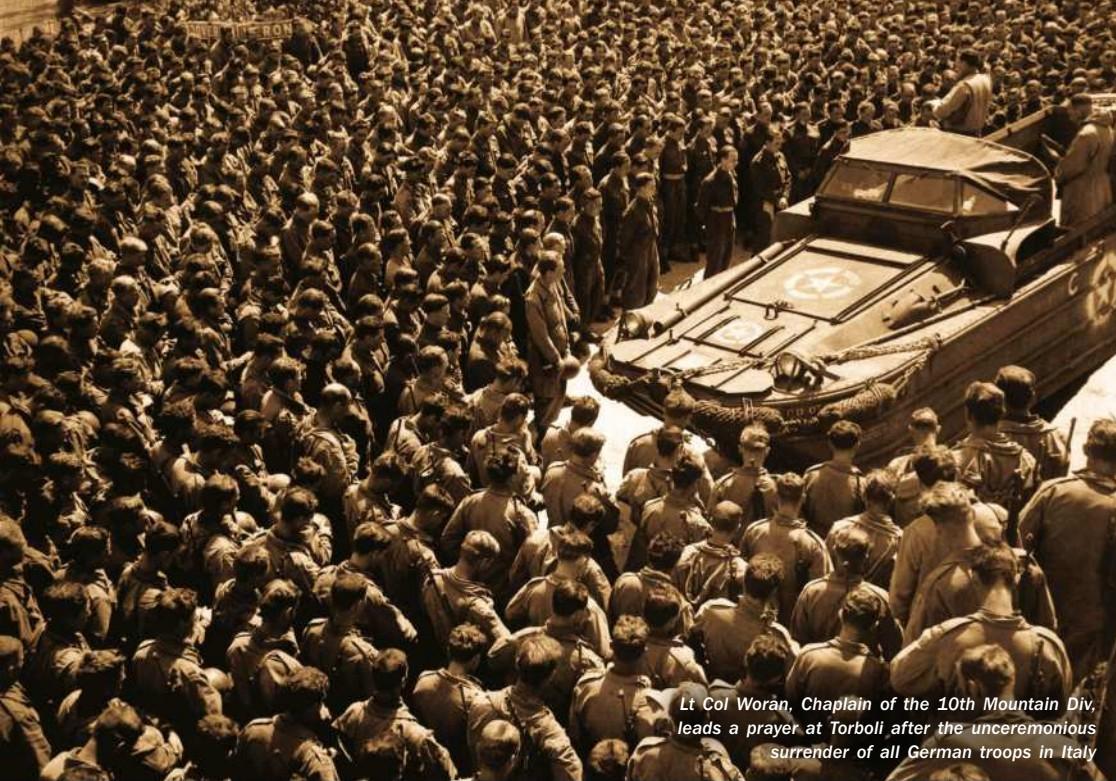
Immediately, SD Chief Herbert Kappler called for the execution of ten Italians for every policeman killed. The Nazis rapidly rounded up 335 Italians – mostly political prisoners, but with others pulled in off the streets at random, including 57 Jews. While their ages ranged between 15 and 70-years-old, none had any ties to the attack itself.

The next day, they were dragged to the Ardeantine Caves outside Rome – where early Christians had buried their martyrs. There, they were



*Italian partisans search for Fascists after Rome's fall to the Allies*

shot in groups of five; each group kneeling on the bodies of those already killed. Once they were done, the Nazis blew up the caves. Over the next ten months, thousands of Italians rallied to the resistance movement, carrying out increasing attacks, resulting in more massacres.



*Lt Col Woran, Chaplain of the 10th Mountain Div, leads a prayer at Torboli after the unceremonious surrender of all German troops in Italy*

roads filled with rubble, the Canadians were mired in painstaking street fighting, breaking through walls and buildings, or 'mouseholing', their way through for more than a week. However, rain, flooding and high casualties put the greater Allied advance on hold, especially once General Montgomery was withdrawn to begin planning for D-Day.

In January 1944, the Allies launched a two-pronged attack, with a direct assault on the Cassino front, followed by an amphibious landing at Anzio, on the way to Rome. Churchill hoped this manoeuvre would outflank the Germans, ensnaring them in a pincer.

Before the first attack, the Allies launched a heavy bombardment of the German positions. However, the subsequent ruins only created even more strategic defensive positions for the Nazis to dig in and reinforce. Meanwhile, the landing at Anzio, 70 miles behind enemy lines, by the British 1st and US 3rd Divisions, was an utter failure. Outnumbered, the Allies ended up on the back foot, besieged in their beachhead, and trapped in gruelling fighting for months.

The Germans proved much more resilient than expected and resisted the Allies for four successive battles. During the second of these, the Allies bombed the Benedictine monastery itself, believing it was being used as a German observation post and was too well fortified to leave in place. In May, during the fourth battle, a French contingent, with troops from the mountains of North Africa, finally managed to infiltrate a hole in the German line. Meanwhile, under a blanket of artillery and mortar fire, the Polish Corps drove through Cassino itself, engaging the Nazis in hand-to-hand fighting and wresting it from their control. They raised their flag over it on 18 May.

With General Clark determined to reach Rome first, subsequent in-fighting among the Allies almost squandered the campaign, allowing the Germans the flee north and reinforce Valmontone, on the final defensive line south of Rome. However, 8,000 of Clark's men later made it through a hole in the line, forcing the Nazis to flee once again. Much to Clark's pleasure, his forces entered Rome on 4 June, just two days shy of the D-Day landings.



*Devastated by the Allied assault on Sicily, the Italians overthrew Mussolini and surrendered after just four weeks of fighting*

Seizing the momentum, the Allies continued to press north, smashing through the Trasimeno Line, before closing down on the Gothic Line, guarding the Po Valley. Although the 8th Army once again penetrated this line in September, as the seasons turned, bad weather pulled the wind from their sails. Sensing an opportunity, the Germans launched a counterattack but were repelled.

As spring broke, the Allies renewed their offensive, with the British 8th Army attacking the northwest, and the American 5th Army moving further west, around Bologna. Barraging through the German lines, the two armies met north of Bologna on 21 April 1945, collapsing the Nazi front and chasing them into the Alps. Days later, the Allies crossed the River Po and took Verona.

Mussolini, who had already cheated captivity once, fled again with the Germans and their fascist allies, but he was captured by partisans and killed on 28 April. His body was dragged through the streets, desecrated and hoisted in the air. The following day, two German generals signed the first Nazi capitulation of the war, giving up Italy and even parts of Austria, and days later, almost one million German troops surrendered.

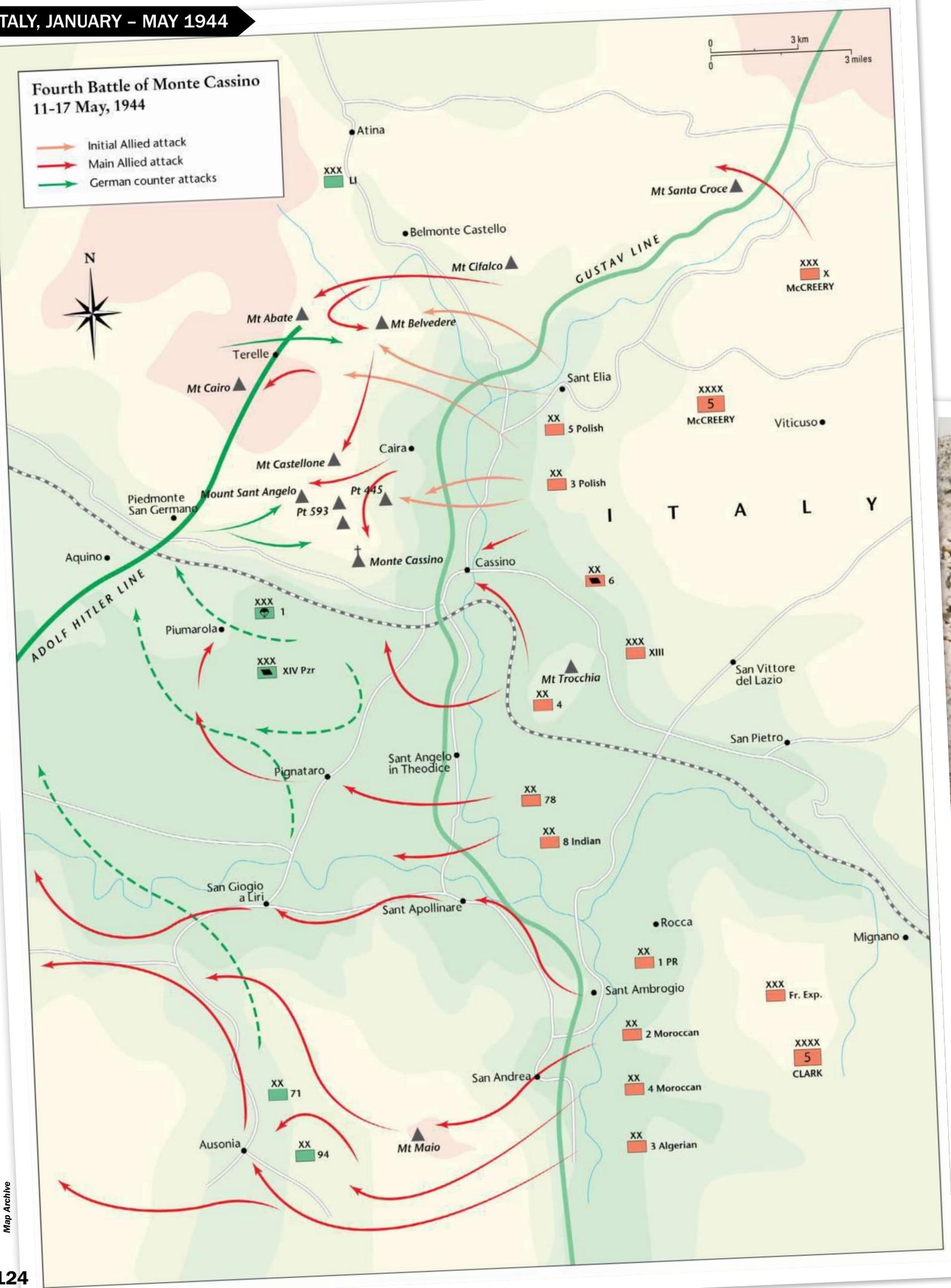
Although the Allies had tied down huge volumes of their own forces in Italy, the campaign forced the Nazis to field even more divisions – suffering 336,000 casualties there, compared to the Allied 313,000. Speaking of the offensive, Churchill said: "This great final battle in Italy will long stand out in history as one of the most famous episodes in this Second World War."



*Despite their best efforts, the Germans slowly found themselves chased further north, from one defensive line to the next*

**Fourth Battle of Monte Cassino  
11-17 May, 1944**

- Initial Allied attack
- Main Allied attack
- German counter attacks



ITALY, JANUARY – MAY 1944

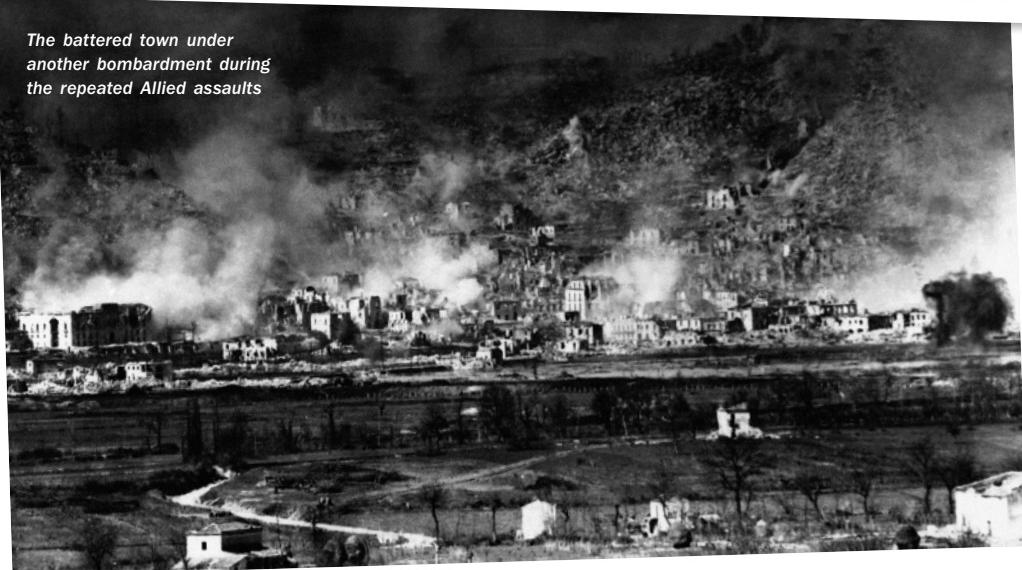
# BATTLE OF MONTE CASSINO

A small Italian town held the key to the advance on Rome, and the Germans were not about to give it up without a fight

WORDS DAVID SMITH



The battered town under another bombardment during the repeated Allied assaults



**F**ollowing the collapse of the German position in North Africa, in May 1943, the Allies were faced with a dilemma. An invasion of France was not yet a realistic proposition, but the fight had to be taken to continental Europe somehow.

A compromise was reached between the British and Americans: Italy would offer a convenient route into Europe, being just a short hop across the Mediterranean. There was an idea that Italy was in some way the 'soft underbelly' of Hitler's Europe and that notion was not outlandish while the country was held by Italian troops.

The initial landing at Sicily was badly managed and around 100,000 German and Italian troops escaped. However, the fall of Mussolini's regime in July led the Italians to open negotiations with the Allies. A race ensued, one that the Allies mishandled. While they dithered, the Germans poured more troops into Italy. The stage was set for some of the hardest fighting of the entire war.

The German strategy was to force the Allies to fight for every inch, while staging organised withdrawals to a series of defensive lines. The most formidable of these, the Gustav Line, was to be held with even greater determination.

The most obvious route to Rome was along Route 6, the Via Casilina, which cut through the narrow Liri valley. To break through into the valley, however, the Allies had to get past two formidable 'gateposts', Monte Maio and Monte Cassino. Cassino would be the scene of fighting that some compared to the worst experienced in World War I. Four separate attempts, spanning 129 days, would be made to wrest the strategic town from the Germans' control.

On the night of 11–12 January 1944, the first battle opened. Men of the French Expeditionary Corps (Moroccans and Algerians under Marshal Alphonse Juin) attacked to the north and made good progress. Juin, in fact, was convinced after six days of fighting that if he was reinforced, he could break through into the Liri valley and unpick the entire Gustav Line.

General Mark Clark, commanding the US Fifth Army, was unimpressed and instead pressed on with his original plan. British X Corps units



*German Fallschirmjäger (paratroop) units offered tough opposition to the Allied forces*



*The shattered remnants of the monastery after repeated Allied bombardment*

crossed the Cariglano River close to the coast, but were met by a fierce counterattack as soon as they reached the opposite bank. The German 94th Division, reinforced by tanks, held firm and were helped when further British crossings were foiled by bad weather and a swollen river.

Clark then chose to press ahead with the third phase of his attack, unleashing the US 36th Division across the Gari River, but this was a disaster, with half of the men who managed to get over the river either killed, wounded or captured.

Still, the First Battle of Monte Cassino lurched on. Partly to distract from the major Allied landings at Anzio on 22 January, Clark probed further north with the men of Juin's FEC and the US 34th Division. Little impact was made on the German defences (although men of the 34th Division came agonisingly close to the walls of the

ancient monastery atop Monte Cassino) and the first battle fizzled out.

The landings at Anzio were a complete success and ought to have undermined the entire Gustav Line, but the commander of US VI Corps, General John P Lucas, was overly cautious and frittered away his advantage, eventually getting bogged down as German forces responded to his surprise arrival. A great opportunity had been lost, and Cassino would need to be attacked again.

More troops had been made available, with the shifting over of three divisions from the British Eighth Army. The 2nd New Zealand, 78th British and 4th Indian Divisions were grouped into II NZ Corps, under the command of General Bernard Freyberg. These men would fight the Second Battle of Monte Cassino.

It would kick off with one of the most controversial episodes of the campaign. The monastery on top of the hill was considered of vital cultural importance and the Germans assured the Allies that they had not and would not occupy it. Clark took them at their word, but Freyberg was unconvinced. Feeling sure the Germans would have placed units in the monastery, he insisted that it be destroyed by aerial bombardment, on 15 February, prior to his assault. The Germans, in fact, had been telling the truth, but after the monastery had been flattened by waves of heavy bombers (at a cost of around a hundred civilian lives), they no longer felt obliged to respect what was now a pile of rubble. The ruins of the monastery became a formidable defensive position and the German General Fridolin von Senger summed up the situation when he commented: "The bombing had the opposite

effect to what was intended. Now we would occupy the abbey without scruple, especially as ruins are better for defence than intact buildings."

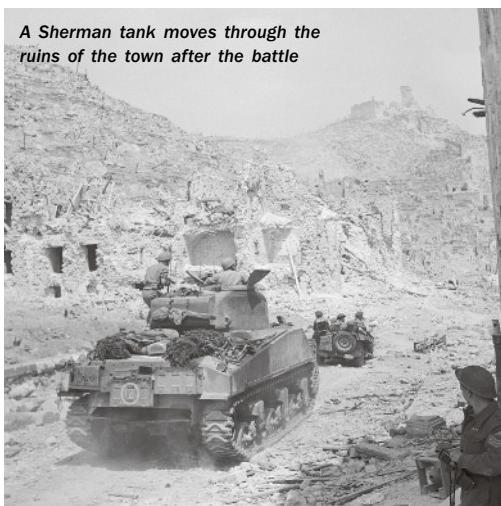
Marshal Juin, commander of the FEC, still had hopes of breaking through into the Liri valley and asked for II NZ Corps to join with his forces, but Clark again demurred. The subsequent attack of the mixed New Zealand-Indian-British corps faltered and then failed as it proved impossible to bring its full weight to bear on the German defences. The Second Battle of Monte Cassino was another failure.

By now it was clear that a more concerted effort was needed to crack the German position. The decision was taken to bring in yet more men and await better weather in May, enabling the Allies to make better use of tanks. To fill the pause, however, and to ensure the Germans kept their attention on the Gustav Line while plans for Operation Overlord were completed, a third assault was improvised.

Operation Dickens, which spawned the Third Battle of Monte Cassino, was little more than a placeholder. Starting on 15 March, it opened with a massive aerial bombardment, this time hitting the entire town. General Freyberg had insisted on this display of aerial power, but the 600 Allied bombers failed to achieve much of anything.

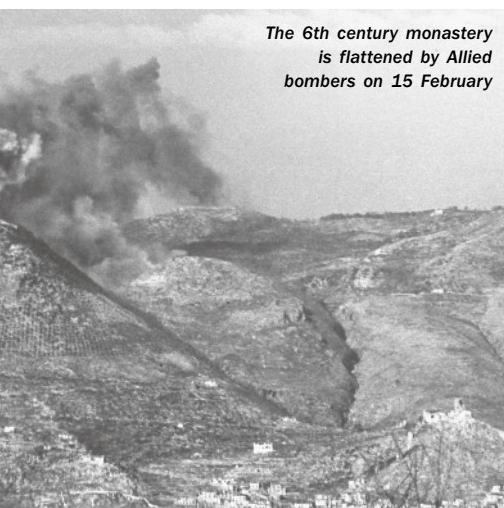
A three-hour artillery bombardment after the bombing presented the Germans with yet more defensible piles of rubble, and although they were living through hellish conditions, their morale remained unbroken. Taking cover in cellars, which sometimes became tombs, the Germans were mostly able to scramble out of their improvised shelters in time to meet their advancing foe.

*A Sherman tank moves through the ruins of the town after the battle*





*The 6th century monastery is flattened by Allied bombers on 15 February*



## LOST IN TRANSLATION

A misunderstood radio intercept may have sealed the fate of Cassino's ancient monastery

The destruction of the monastery at Monte Cassino was widely condemned at the time, and new evidence suggests it may have been the product of a simple misunderstanding. There was no appetite for destroying such an important building, but under the pressure and harsh realities of war, where men's lives had to be balanced against the value of a building, difficult decisions were made.

There was suspicion that even if the Germans did not have fighting units in the building, they at least had artillery spotters. The commanding elevation of the monastery made it a prime location for spotters, and German artillery fire was extremely accurate.

General Bernard Freyberg worked hard to convince General Mark Clark to bomb the ancient building, and he was clearly persuasive, but a badly translated intercept may have factored in to the final decision. A German

*Polish troops move into the ruins of the monastery atop Monte Cassino*

paratroop officer was heard to ask: "Ist Abt in Kloster?" This was taken to mean, "Is the battalion in the abbey?", with 'Abt' being interpreted as an abbreviation for 'Abteilung'. Instead, the officer had been inquiring on the whereabouts of the Abbot. It is possible this provided enough of a pretext to justify the bombing of the monastery, but there is debate over how such flimsy evidence could have turned the tide of the argument.

Clark himself believed the decision was wrong and freely criticised it after the war, calling it a "tactical military mistake of the first magnitude", while conveniently forgetting that the final decision had been his.



*An American anti-tank gun, pictured during the fighting around Cassino*

When Allied tanks attempted to roll into Cassino, once the guns had fallen silent, they found progress agonisingly slow because the roads were all blocked. A single German Panzer IV, well sited and under cover, knocked out one Sherman tank after another as they attempted to pick their way through the debris. Bulldozers were called up to clear the way, but they came under heavy fire themselves and when the rains returned the battle became a brutal slogging match.

The town was gradually occupied, however, tank attacks then failed badly due to poor planning. Advancing without infantry support, the tanks were massacred and the assault was called off. Operation Diadem promised to finally end the stalemate. This was to be on a completely different scale to the first three battles, with 108 battalions and 2,000 tanks attacking on a 20-mile front. As if the Allied forces ranged against the Germans were

not already cosmopolitan enough, a corps of Polish troops arrived and was given the task of taking the ruined monastery, the symbol of the entire struggle.

At 11pm on the night of 11 May, 1,600 artillery pieces opened fire for 40 minutes before the massive assault began. Men of the 8th Indian Division found their crossing of the Rapido River to be a deadly undertaking. The canvas boats employed had been stored for extended periods and had been weakened by insect infestation. Many men drowned as their riddled boats sank during the crossing.

The weight of the attack, however, was irresistible. By 16 May, British tanks had found their way to the Via Casilina beyond Cassino and the German position was no longer tenable. German troops began to pull out under cover of darkness that night and on 18 May, II Polish Corps took possession of the devastated monastery on top of Monte Cassino.

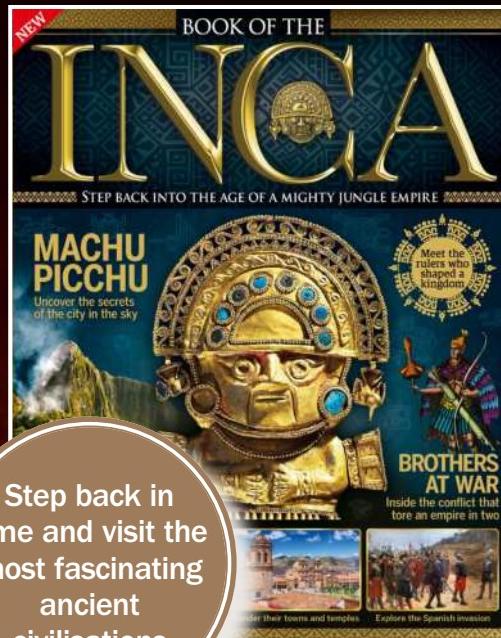
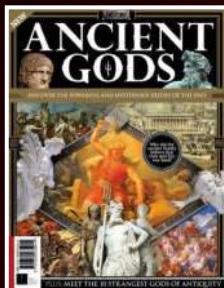
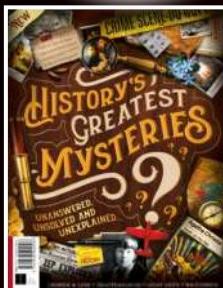
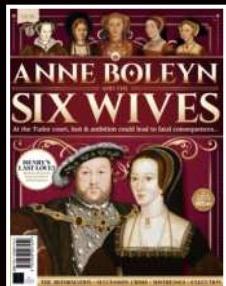
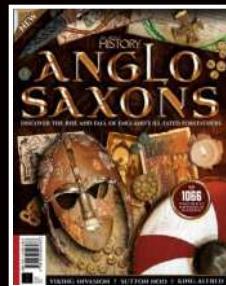
The four battles had exacted a terrible price on the Allies. Not only had they been held up in their advance on Rome, they had taken around 50,000 casualties. German losses were less than half that, and they had managed to once more withdraw in good order.

On 25 May, US VI Corps finally broke out from its Anzio beachhead and linked up with Clark's Fifth Army. Faced with the choice of bottling up the retreating Germans or grabbing headlines by liberating the Eternal City, Clark chose glory and rushed into Rome.

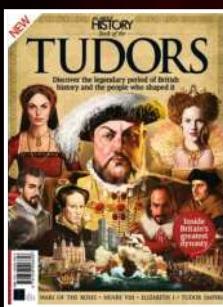
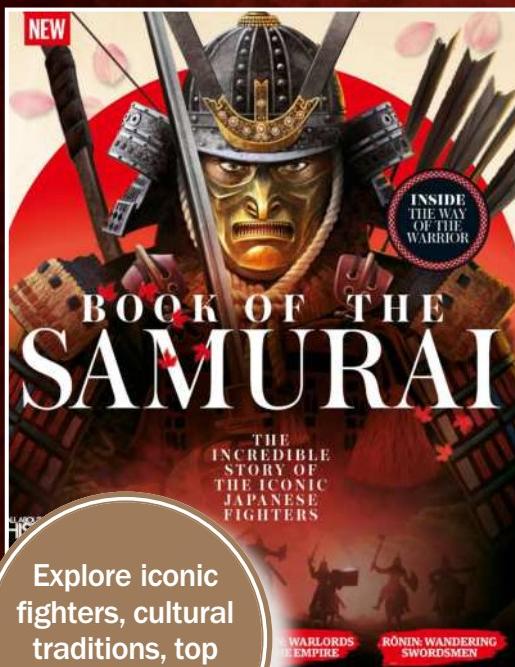
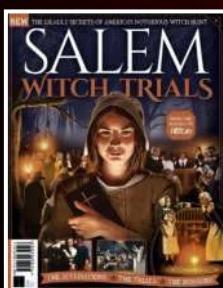
The Germans were able to fall back to yet more defensive positions, in the Gothic Line. They would not finally surrender until 2 May 1945.



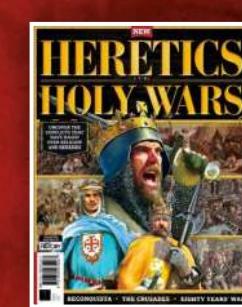
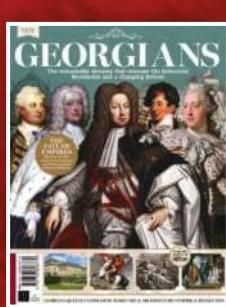
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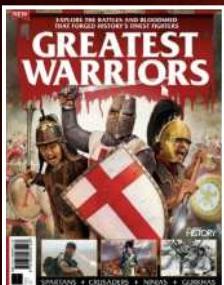
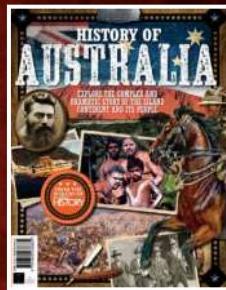
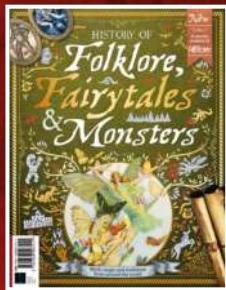
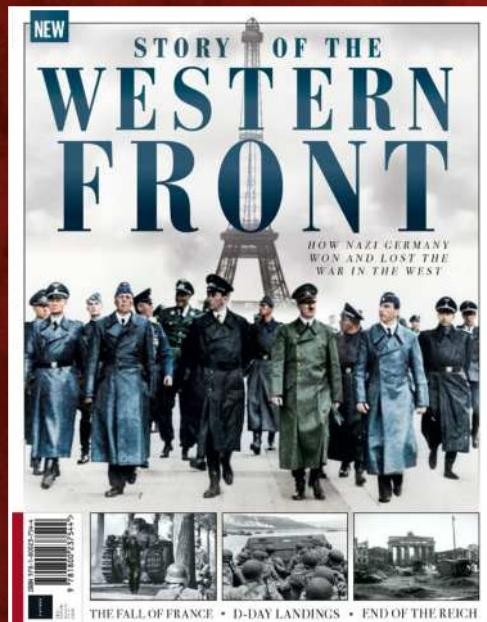
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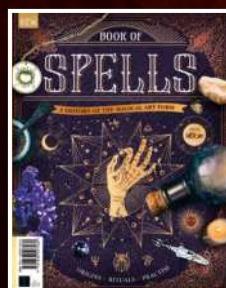
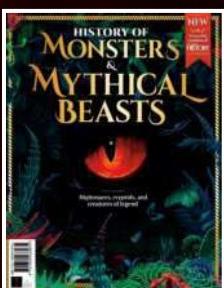
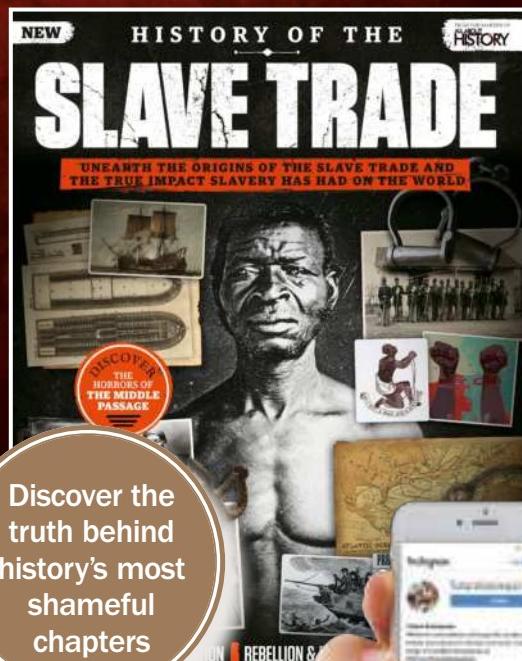
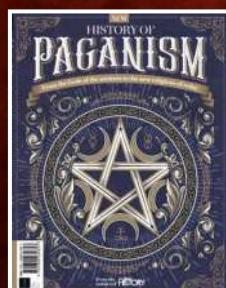
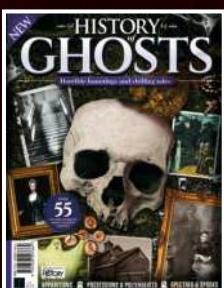


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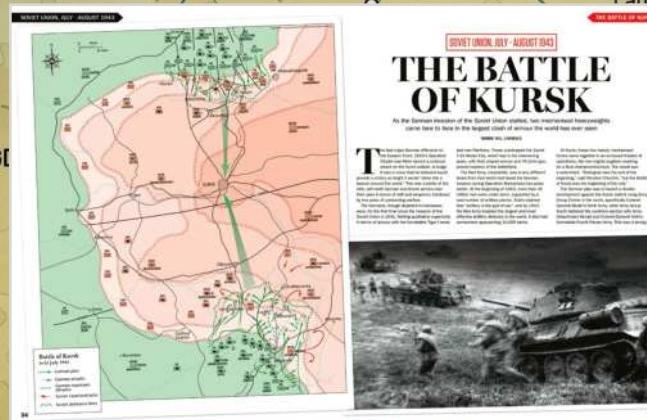
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